Research Article

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"You Just Want Somebody to Call on, to Say Help": Working African-American Mothers' Experiences of Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the experiences of Black mothers as they navigated their children's transition to online learning while working as essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study highlights the mothers' hopes for their children's education and their challenges in providing support. Seventeen African American mothers participated, sharing their experiences, challenges, and best practices, which made them feel supported. The research utilized a phenomenological methodology consisting of an initial online survey and individual interviews. The online survey, developed by the research team, identified participants and captured demographic information and key characteristics of their transition to online learning during the lockdown. Follow-up qualitative interviews provided more profound insights into the mothers' experiences and challenges. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using qualitative thematic content analysis. Three themes emerged from the study: (1) a desire for humanity and communication, (2) technology and the digital divide, and (3) balancing work and online learning. Based on the findings, recommendations are offered to help administrators, teachers, and community workers rethink support services provided to families to improve familial/school partnerships for students.

Keywords: COVID-19, online learning, African American parents, K-12 education, emergency online learning, qualitative research

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools transitioned to online learning, the efficacy of which varied widely across districts and classes. News outlets highlighted barriers such as unreliable internet access and insufficient computer devices for students and families. Recognizing these challenges, many districts provided computers and hotspots and continued offering free meals at designated locations. Some even equipped school buses with Wi-Fi, parking them in neighborhoods with limited internet access. Despite these efforts, the demand for resources remained high. Many students relied on free Wi-Fi from fast food restaurants to complete assignments. Additionally, numerous teachers left the profession due to the difficulty of balancing their children's online schooling with their teaching responsibilities.

This research was initiated by a news report revealing that nearly 5,000 students had not logged into one school district's online platform. The school board tasked the district with identifying these students and examining the barriers to their participation in e-learning. The pandemic not only exposed educational disparities but also led to increased untimely deaths, homelessness, and food insecurity, disproportionately affecting people of color. Longstanding inequalities highlighted by educators were magnified on the national stage.

Hypotheses

Given the challenges of online learning for families and the general stressors of the pandemic, this study aims to highlight the experiences of those most likely to face difficulties with online learning—African American mothers who are essential workers. Through a qualitative research design, the following research questions were explored:

H_1: How did parents and caregivers navigate working while simultaneously leading their children's home learning process?

H_2: How did parents experience online learning, including the support and services they received from their child(ren)'s school?

H_3: What support did they wish they had received in managing the online learning process?

Black parents and caregivers who deeply cared about their children and their educational outcomes were at the center of this work. Their frustrations stemmed from trying to do their best for their children during a challenging time. The data from this research aimed to provide schools, educators, and districts with insights into the experiences of parents and caregivers, helping stakeholders develop better strategies to support the whole student. The participants actively participated in their children's online learning and shared their experiences and desires for improved support. This was an opportunity for schools to reimagine education for the most marginalized and to learn lessons from the online learning period during stay-at-home orders. In the study, the terms "Black" and "African American" are used interchangeably, as well as "mother," "parents," and "caregivers," to be inclusive and accurately describe the experiences shared by the study's seventeen participants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Black Mothers' Engagement in Children's Academics

For this study, the participants identified as Black mothers. It is important to recognize for Black mothers, a layered history, experiences, and perspectives shape the complexity of their identity in the context of America. Jones (2003) posited, "the majority of Black mothers have managed in spite of realities of single parenthood, poverty, prejudice, and limited opportunity to beat the odds and raise healthy and productive young men and women" (p. 238). Hill Collins (2009) emphasized for women of color, motherhood cannot be separated from historical context: "Motherhood occurs in a specific historical situation framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender" (p. 371). While the narrative on Black mothers is often portrayed negatively, recent work has increasingly focused on understanding their strengths (Cooper, 2007, 2009).

Parental Engagement

Parental engagement has been linked to successful outcomes for children. Before the pandemic, parental engagement was typically defined as setting expectations, participating in school groups like the Parent Teacher Organization, and helping with homework. However, studies show these narrow definitions often portray low-income African American families as engagement-deficient and overlook the non-school-based ways they support their children's education (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Cooper, 2009; Grantham & Henfield, 2011). Research indicates Black parents engage in their children's education by meeting basic home needs (food, shelter, etc.), enforcing high academic expectations, and enrolling their children in community or church-based extracurricular activities (Clark, 1990; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Williams & Sánchez, 2012). Additionally, Black parents prepare their children to navigate a school system where racism and inequality persist, teaching positive racial messages to counter institutional and interpersonal racism (Friend et al., 2011). They also advocate for their children's education in response to school inequities, such as disproportionate disciplinary practices and tracking.

Despite these contributions, the dominant notions of parental engagement often ignore the efforts of Black parents. Like in-person engagement, online parental engagement also has unique aspects which need to be explored. Recent attention has been given to the role of parents in online education, both before and after the pandemic. Hughley et al. (2020) suggest previous understandings of parent engagement do not consider the racial differences and discrimination faced by African American families.

Parents and Caregivers and Distance Learning During COVID 19

The transition to online learning has presented a set of unique challenges for both students and parents. Davis et al. (2021) reported parents with a child struggling with online learning "experience heightened levels of mental health distress when their

child struggles to adapt to a distance learning pedagogy" (p.61). The authors suggest policymakers and schools consider providing resources for "proxy educators"(p.61) such as parents and caregivers. Coleman et al. (2021) found through an out-of-school STEM program for Black and Latina girls during the pandemic, participation in online programming declined. However, communication remained intact.

The authors suggested parent communication was most effective through email and SMS messages. They believed despite the pandemic's challenges around parent participation in events, a "multi-layered communication approach" (p.1319) is necessary. This finding indicates that while the pandemic changed how families engaged in their children's education, a single form of engagement does not imply a lack of involvement. Administrators, teachers, and community leaders must communicate with families using multiple formats.

Garbe et al. (2020) found that most parents agreed with school closure policies and were generally satisfied with the support provided by school districts. However, they also described challenges, including balancing work demands, multiple learners, and their needs.

Essential Workers

Essential workers and frontline workers maintained the society's structures, enabling many industries and institutions to provide basic necessities for people during lockdown. Brundney (2020) posits there are at least six identified industry groupings, including (1) grocery, convenience, and drug store workers; (2) healthcare professionals and support personnel; (3) public transit workers; (4) janitors and building cleaners; (5) trucking, warehouse, and postal workers; and (6) childcare and social service workers. In essential work, these workers provide or deliver vital goods and services in their workplaces in a way which requires them to interact with other people. According to Brundney (2020), there are over 30 million essential workers in the United States, including 10 million Black females and foreign-born workers. These workers are typically low-income and at increased health risk. Blau et al. (2020) distinguish between essential and frontline workers, analyzing their duties and wages using definitions from the Department of Homeland Security. Essential workers often come from industries vital to society's infrastructure and can sometimes work virtually. In contrast, frontline workers, who typically earn lower wages, including healthcare workers, make up 20% of this population.

Impact of COVID-19 on Black Women/Mothers

Everyone around the world felt the devastating impact of COVID-19 intensely. This impact was felt more intensely by marginalized communities already suffering from disparate life outcomes in many areas like health, education, and economics. Studies show COVID-19 was particularly devastating for Black women compared to their counterparts. Gur et al. (2020) found pregnant Black women had an increase in anxiety and depression due to having their employment negatively impacted and the threat of facing long-term economic burdens. Chandler et al. (2020) found due to long-lasting disparities in healthcare outcomes for Black women and stories of

medical maltreatment for Black people, 79% of the participants in their study reported "confusion, misunderstanding, and mistrust of the information that they were receiving about COVID-19." (p. 80) For Black mothers, the impact of COVID-19 was complex. Many faced the impossible task of working as essential workers while overseeing their children's education. Pennant (2022) characterized Black women's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as a "pandemic within a pandemic," (p. 535) where they were burdened with caring for themselves and their communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In examining online learning experiences for Black working women, this study is framed by *Educational Navigational Capital* (ENC). ENC is a theory which highlights the additional challenges and barriers Black parents may face in navigating the educational system and advocating for their children. This theory recognizes the systemic racism and historical inequities which can create obstacles for Black parents, such as cultural and linguistic barriers, limited access to information and resources, and negative stereotypes and biases held by some educators and school personnel. The concept of educational navigational capital emphasizes the resilience and resourcefulness of Black parents in overcoming these barriers and ensuring their children receive a quality education. It also highlights the importance of building supportive networks and partnerships between parents, schools, and communities to promote equity and improve student outcomes. Overall, educational navigational capital theory helps draw attention to Black parents' unique experiences in the education system and the need for policies and practices that support their engagement and advocacy efforts (Sealey-Ruiz et al., 2019)

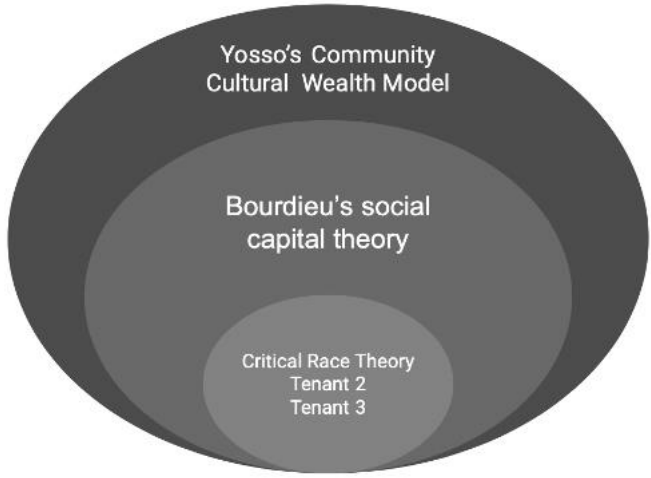

Figure 1: Educational Navigational Capital (Sealey-Rtuiz et al., 2019)

Three prominent educational theories inform this theory. The first is Critical Race Theory (CRT)- specifically tenants two and three, which highlight the role of racism in the schooling experiences for Black parents by positing racism is prevalent in societal processes and is commonplace (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Scholars of CRT highlight the ways racism and race within institutions, along with intersections with other forms of oppression, create practices that subordinate certain racial groups (Crenshaw et al., 1995). In education, CRT also urges scholars to examine how privileged groups' educational ideologies, practices, and policies are preserved and positioned as normal (Lynn & Dixson, 2013).

A notable example of how schools prioritize and privilege white norms of engagement is embedded in the second foundational theory: Bourdieu's (1977) social capital theory. Cultural capital is described as knowledge, credentials, and goods of the dominant group used for social and cultural exclusion, as nondominant groups may be limited in their access to this sort of capital or may possess other forms of cultural capital not acknowledged (Bourdieu, 1977). CRT posits privileged forms of social capital render Black parents deficient in their engagement with their child's education.

The last foundational theory in ENC is Yosso's (2016) Cultural Wealth Model, specifically navigational wealth. Yosso (2016) argues that Bourdieu's (1977) understanding of social capital was narrow and subsequently provided an expanded concept of community cultural wealth to help explain the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities marginalized communities often possess. Navigational capital is one of the forms of capital Yosso (2016) argues remains unacknowledged. According to Yosso (2016), navigational capital refers to the skills, knowledge, and networks individuals use to navigate systems and institutions, such as the education system, to benefit themselves and their communities. Through CRT's more extensive framing and navigational capital theory, the unique ways Black women navigate past the exclusionary, racist norms of engagement to advocate for their children and ensure the educational success of online learning can be explored.

METHOD

To enhance school-caregiver/parent partnerships in supporting students, school leaders need to understand the needs and expectations of parents/caregivers for their children and the necessary support. Methods were designed and implemented to answer the following research questions:

H_1: How did parents and caregivers navigate working while simultaneously leading their children's home learning process?

H_2: How did parents experience online learning, including the support and services they received from their child(ren)'s school?

H_3: What support did they wish they had received in managing the online learning process?

Research Design

A qualitative study was conducted to learn more about how parents/caregivers experienced online learning during stay-at-home orders of the COVID-19 Pandemic. A phenomenological model was used to gather in-depth information about the experiences of parents/caregivers facilitating online learning for their children. Participants were required to complete a screening questionnaire to provide demographic data and availability at the beginning of the study. After completing the screening questionnaire, individual interviews were conducted with participants. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed for data analysis.

Positionality

According to Moustakas (1994), the primary researchers need to relinquish preconceived ideas about the nature of the investigated phenomena. Drawing from the Greek concept of epoche, meaning "to abstain or stay away from" (p. 85), this section briefly recounts our encounters with the topic.

Dr. Parker Moore is an Assistant Professor of Multicultural Education at Wake Forest University. Her research interests include social foundations in education, qualitative research methods, social justice education, parent/caregiver engagement in schools, and community engagement. Dr. Moore also serves as the Executive Director of the Wake Forest University Children's Defense Fund Freedom School, a free six-week, literacy-based summer program for rising third through eighth-grade students, with the mission of empowering youth to excel and believe in their ability to make a difference in themselves, their families, communities, country, and the world with hope, education, and action. Through this work, Dr. Parker spends extensive time listening to the experiences of parents/ caregivers of color and advocating for better strategies to engage all families.

During the study, Camry Wilborn-Mercer was a community engagement professional at Wake Forest University. In this role, she worked with district leaders and other nonprofits to create programs and policy interventions to support family engagement, which yielded academic success for children. Through this work, Wilborn-Mercer helped run university-sponsored programs like tutoring, mentoring, and summer camps for students of color and low-income students. As a result, Wilborn-Mercer has significant experience working and hearing from families of color about their unique schooling experiences.

Data Collection

The study was advertised through the local news and Facebook fliers and with previous camp participants of a summer camp hosted by research team members. Once the participants completed the survey, they were contacted to schedule a qualitative interview. The interviews ranged from 30-45 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Procedures

The procedures used in the research study included one screening survey and an individual interview of the three participants.

Screening Survey Questionnaire

An electronic screening questionnaire was administered via Google Forms to each participant before the interview. The questionnaire was designed to provide basic demographic information about the participants, their child's grade level, household, income, and racial demographic for caregiver and child. Lastly, participants were asked if they participated in their school's remote learning program.

Interview

All participants were parents/caregivers in North Carolina managing remote learning for their child(ren) during the stay-at-home orders implemented in the spring of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. These criteria ensured participants would have the knowledge to provide insight into the research questions asked by the research team. The interview process, along with the questions, is outlined in the interview guide document (Appendix A). All interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Study Enrollment

Participants self-enrolled in the study by completing an open Google Form. Participants were instructed to provide their phone/online interview availability after completing the survey. The researchers contacted the participants once they provided their availability. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for data analysis.

The study was advertised on the local news evening broadcast and through the university news website. In addition, the study was advertised to families who had previously participated in summer programs hosted by the university through Facebook. Participants completed a survey identifying the following information:

- Household income
- Number of people in the household
- Student School
- If the parents/caregivers are considered essential workers
- Did the student participate in the e-learning program?

Once the participants completed the survey, they were contacted by a research team member to schedule a qualitative interview. The interviews ranged from 30-45 minutes. The participants received a $20 gift card for their participation following the interview.

Participants

Participants were students' parents and/or caregivers in a small southern city. The children of the participants were identified by their parents and/or caregivers as attending public, private, or charter schools. The participants ranged from having 2-10 people living in the household; income ranged from under $20,000 to over $100,000. The study included participants who self-identified as White, Black or African American, Hispanic, and two races or Biracial. All the participants in the study had one or more students in the local school system, either in the local public school district or a charter school. For the focus of this paper, Black parents and or caregivers were selected as the focus, through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). According to Patton, "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling" (p. 169). To that end, Black students were selected as students who were at greater risk of educational disadvantage in this southern city.

Data Analysis

The data for this study were collected through an online survey and recorded interviews. After each round of interviews, the research team met to discuss key points and compiled detailed notes. These notes helped guide the second data analysis of the transcribed interviews. Survey data were collected via a secure university subscription to Google Forms and transcribed by a professional service. Once transcribed, the data were analyzed for themes. The research team identified key themes through multiple rounds of close reading of the interviews, particularly focusing on the impact of e-learning on Black caregivers. The study was conducted after obtaining Institutional Review Board approval. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and given the choice to participate. Recordings were made only with participant consent; otherwise, note-taking was used for data collection.

FINDINGS

The study revealed while the transition to e-learning was difficult, parents and caregivers did the best they could during an unprecedented time. The parents and caregivers expressed they met the transition to e-learning with various challenges presented by the school district, technology, or issues around communication; however, they persisted. While most parents believed everyone involved was doing their best under the circumstances, many believed a few changes could have allowed more success for their children and their ability to assist them. Three central themes emerged from the data: (1) a desire for humanity and *communication,* (2) technology and the digital divide, and (3) balancing work and online learning.

Theme 1: Humanity and Communication

Parents and caregivers often described their e-learning experiences in terms of whether they felt treated with humanity. They wished for interactions with school personnel to consider their full humanity. Caregivers frequently mentioned weak communication, leading to misunderstandings. They expressed a desire for better communication strategies, such as examples of using technology, setting curriculum expectations, and more open communication between teachers and caregivers.

Caregivers believed training sessions would help them better understand each platform their child was expected to use and locate daily assignments. They also requested face-to-face communication with teachers for clarification, expectation setting, and personalized instruction for students and caregivers. Communication struggles seemed linked to a lack of consideration for basic humanity. Many communication errors could be avoided if humanity was centered on interactions between educators and parents. Parents felt confused and frustrated by the numerous expectations and platforms.

Keisha, a mom of two children, one in a charter middle school and one in a public elementary school expressed her frustration after receiving very little instruction from her child's school. She shared how she experienced communication with her children's respective teachers after the transition to online. Keisha's son received his instruction through packets mailed to her home:

> They did mail them. And they were a mess. No real direction, absolutely none. Actually, the dialogue was pretty much like do what you can. I was like, okay, so, first of all that's a really rough thing to tell a middle schooler, because of course he can't do anything. So, they didn't do a good job. And then, the packet, the books, were immense. There was no way they would've completed that by the end of the school year anyway. One packet we never even got to.
>
> So, I think they did not really do an effective job communicating. I think a lot was left to the students. Even on Kelly's level. We could contact her teacher, but I don't think it was as specific as I would've wanted it to be.

Keisha's narrative highlights the disparities that e-learning created in various school settings. Students in charter schools did not have as many opportunities as those in public schools, as she shared:

> They didn't have, I guess, the resources to give every student a Chromebook or a hotspot. They just didn't, so we just kind of were fending for ourselves, and trying to sort through maybe emails and newsletters, and things like that.

In addition to the lack of communication, participants revealed when communication was offered, it was simultaneously confusing and conflicting. Keisha shared the lack of communication was also met with changing expectations, leaving her son unmotivated to complete the work.

> So, as time went on, we were told that Green Academy had come to the thought process that they were not going to review these packets, and they

> were not grading. So, it didn't work. At some point the struggle to – people want to be directed, and they want praise for being successful at a task. But if there's no reward at the end, especially at his age, he had no interest to do it.

Keisha shared how the expectations around the work packets changed - leaving her son unmotivated to complete the task. In Joan's case, she found that the lack of communication with her child's teacher was frustrating. Despite trying to assist her children daily, Joan shared:

> The teacher never engaged me to say, "Hey, India is not turning in her assignments. I'm not sure what's going on. I see that maybe she's logging in, but some things aren't getting done. And she's not doing enough in the day." You know? So that was very frustrating to me, Because all I had to do was to know. And I can't blame it on the teachers, but at the same time, I felt like some of that the teacher could have reached out.

Asynchronous learning was widely used in the spring of 2020, and caregivers and students found this format challenging. Families wanted better opportunities to explain their personal experiences. For example, essential worker families needed to communicate how their work hours conflicted with teachers' expectations for students to complete tasks during the school day. Many families found the school's expectations directly conflicted with their work schedules.

When humanity was present, mothers working for the school district felt more supported. Their insider knowledge of the schooling process helped them better navigate the online learning transition. Linda, a Teaching Assistant at a local public school with two children attending Title 1 schools, felt supported by the school during this time. When asked what kind of academic support was provided to her child, she responded with:

> Okay, now, they did little incentive things like, when she would complete everything on time, and presenting everything on time, they would come to the house. They delivered her little gifts. It was like they were rewarding. I thought it was very rewarding to do something like that. Like they say, they brought it to the house, and it was a surprise. They had it in a gift bag, and it was to let her know that they are proud of her accomplishment, and to keep doing what she was doing.

Linda described what most parents wanted from their communications with the school: the adults cared about them and were willing to go the extra mile to show they cared about their child and celebrated their successes. Linda reflected on the relationship between the school and the family, emphasizing the importance of communication and maintaining a sense of community during one of the most challenging times in public education. During the pivot to digital interactions, her child's school prioritized taking gifts to the children's homes to show their support and care. Being flexible when it comes to working with families is something Linda further described in her experiences with the school:

> We could call the school, and they would make arrangements. They would meet him at the door. A teacher would have it so, she could meet him at the door at the school, since nobody could go in, and anything he needed, she would make sure he would get it.

Having the ability to communicate with their teacher and having a teacher willing to meet them where they were, either by coming to or meeting them at school, confirmed that she had an excellent teacher who provided her with everything she needed to excel.

Theme 2: Technology and the Great Divide

When the novel coronavirus hit in spring 2020, public schools shifted to remote instruction, increasing the dependence on internet access and mobile technology such as laptops and tablets. Both students and their caregivers needed technology as families transitioned to working and learning from home. Many families lacked multiple computers or broadband access, relying on school-provided laptops, mobile hotspots, and Wi-Fi-enabled buses in local communities.

Caregivers reported challenges with school-provided hotspots, which were sometimes controlled by the district and cut off after school hours, leaving essential workers unable to support their children. Additionally, a local cable and internet provider offered free internet to low-income families but required a credit card, limiting access for those without one.

Some families were initially reluctant to request additional devices, preferring to share the one they had. However, they quickly realized each household member needed their own device. This lack of technology access was especially evident for families with children in local charter schools. One parent shared how she felt about the lack of technology:

> I think that parents don't realize that, even if you got one device and you're trying to share it, it would have just been a mess. I'm grateful that I chose the decision to request each of them an individual electronic device from the school versus saying, oh, they could just share. No, that would've been a nightmare. And I didn't realize it would've been a nightmare, I just happened to make the right decision this time.

Because many parents were facing new forms of technology while managing their work demands, troubleshooting became more of a challenge:

> Then the teacher was like, type in and let me know if something's going on, but at that same time, they're moving on with whatever else they need to move on with, and so, the electronic component, while I'm trying to help my daughter troubleshoot, she's missing the next level of instruction because the teacher can't hear her respond. And so, you got to make a decision. We can't troubleshoot right now because class is moving on, and you're going to miss that, you just won't be able to speak. When it was just a small thing of being able to go into the settings and making sure that microphone was checked on or off, whichever one it was, it needed to be the opposite.

For many parents, understanding the technology their child was using was a challenge. One mother shared her wish to have the local school system offer classes to explain how to use the technology:

> I know here this school system has a school page, you know, I don't understand why they haven't been utilizing the school TV channel with some You know some of those programs that they're already in place, whatever they're using, I would have liked to be able to see them on TV saying, "Hey parents, Brandon sends out a good message.". That's the Chief Communication officer of the Bowen County school. You know, he sends out a message. And so, he could say, "Hey parents, we're going to be training on Canvas today.", at 5, at 9, at 12, or 2 whatever time they identify. And just to give you an idea of what you're going to be doing when the school start.

Theme 3: Making it Work While Working

All the families in the study worked full-time jobs and often expressed challenges in balancing work and supporting online learning. Mothers faced difficulties working from home while overseeing their children's education. Tamara expressed concern about juggling full-time work and online learning responsibilities. Black mothers often work in essential fields such as healthcare, education, public service, and essential consumer goods while managing their children's education. The impact of COVID-19 on Black women has been more severe than on their white counterparts. Gur et al. (2020) found pregnant Black women experienced increased anxiety and depression due to negative impacts on their employment and long-term economic burdens.

> It was a little taxing. It was more hard, initially, because I was still working full-time. So, I had two children in public school and one daughter that was in private school. The public school, honestly, was way more lenient than the private school, almost too lenient for my liking, but I still think that my sons did well. I had a– well, he was a sophomore then, and a senior in high school. My daughter was in fifth grade, but hers was particularly stressful just because they still expected her to do all seven, eight subjects, and the specials too. They wanted her to still do gym and music and art. I was like, "Oh my gosh, I've been at work all day." They're emailing; they were emailing several times a day, and I'm already feeling some type of way because I can't be at home with her; I have to work, and I don't know how long I was working, but I do feel some sense of responsibility to help her with her work. So, it was incredibly frustrating and just like anxiety inducing in the beginning.

The nuanced scenarios which the mothers described underscored how, for these women, not working was not an option. These essential workers were left facing the demands of their jobs at the height of the pandemic and managing online learning.

Ruth, a healthcare essential worker, described the challenges she faced with her work schedule and trying to assist her son:

> …because we were kinda working in opposition. He stayed up, So, when I was working, and he should've been up in school, he was asleep. And so by the time he got up to do his school work, I'm done with my work and ready to lay down, and I'm saying get on your work, get on your work…

Stacy, a mom of a 7th-grade son, shared how difficult it was to manage online schooling while both she and her husband had to work out of the home as essential workers:

> I mean it had a huge impact, because you know like I said he was on his own for most of it, you know most of the day, and I guess we could have done some of it at night, but for me I didn't, well we thought he was doing it and we were, you know my husband would check on him before he left and then, I get home shortly. "Have you done your work?" "Yeah." And so, you know it's on to the other task by that time, the evening job, you know cook and clean and all that stuff.

DISCUSSION

The narrative on Black mothers often emphasizes lack. However, Black mothers in this study ranged from essential workers to public servants such as police officers, healthcare administrators, and teaching assistants. These mothers proved to be the backbone of their communities while navigating their children's educational system. They discussed challenges, including navigating platforms, seeking open communication, and managing their mental and physical health.

The first theme, lack of humanity in communication, was highlighted by participants who wished for more personal communication from schools and teachers. They often did not know their students missed work until grades were reported as zero. This lack of communication is consistent with historical mismatches between Black parents and schools, which calls for a more culturally relevant approach in public education. Effective communication in Black homes typically involves direct collaboration between teachers and parents to achieve student outcomes.

The second theme, the technology divide, has long been challenging for low-income communities and schools. Many families lack sufficient or up-to-date technology, and broadband internet access is often limited. While hotspots have been used, their control by school districts has made access more challenging. Reddrick et al. (2020) found that geographical disparities, profit-based discrimination, technology deployment costs, and socio-economic factors contribute to the lack of digital options for low-income urban and rural households.

The United States has had a complicated history with technology in marginalized communities. The lack of technology in schools has led to its absence in many homes, where families often rely on internet-enabled phones. The pandemic revealed a widespread lack of knowledge on using technology. Additionally, the education

system's focus on testing has hindered technology integration into daily learning, complicating the transition to online education.

The third theme is balancing work with online learning. Working in essential roles created increased stress. These women were responsible for managing their jobs while navigating online learning for their children. The combined impact of full-time work and the evolving pandemic landscape in the U.S. educational system led many to leave the workforce to manage changing schedules and the daily needs of children unable to return to school buildings.

Implications

Several implications emerged from this study. During the pandemic, school districts relied on online learning to prevent community spread, highlighting the need for reliable broadband access. This access must accommodate multiple family members using online learning. Additionally, families need up-to-date, functional computers that can handle the demands of assignments and internet use. Reliable broadband access has become as essential as electricity in the home.

This study suggests new ways for schools and districts to collaborate with families on technology implementation. Participants often requested instructional opportunities to learn about the platforms used by their students. Many districts offer parental coaches who could provide technology courses on platform basics, leading to better student outcomes. A second implication is the need for improved communication between educators and caregivers during limited face-to-face contact. Participants believed better communication would help them assist their children more effectively. They wanted more information from teachers through text messages, personal emails, or one-on-one online meetings such as Zoom or Skype. While communication was a major frustration, parents sought more interaction with teachers to ensure their child's success.

Attention must also be focused on exceptional children and their success outside the classroom. Many families reported not receiving accommodations for their child's disability. Schools and districts should assess all students receiving accommodations and improve communication with parents and caregivers about educational plans during the pandemic. Resources should be provided to expand the staff serving in these roles. Finally, reimagining learning during a global pandemic should consider the impact of essential work on families, changing schedules, and their ability to assist with e-learning. Local communities can contribute to the whole child's well-being in this reimagined learning environment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the role of parents and caregivers in student learning success during the pandemic has been challenging due to domestic responsibilities and work demands. They have navigated unpredictable circumstances related to school openings, closures, technology divides, and changing communication. The most important consideration when working with families is to center humanity in every interaction. This includes acknowledging the pandemic's impact on families and

approaching communication with the belief most parents are doing their best under challenging circumstances. As schools transition back to in-person learning, we can learn valuable lessons from the 2020 pandemic. One key lesson is that many Black mothers work tirelessly to ensure their children receive the best education possible.

As this study demonstrates, Black mothers balance their jobs' demands while navigating online schooling challenges. To ensure the success of Black students, schools must prioritize communication, collaboration, and adaptability to families' circumstances, focusing on educating the whole child.

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