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Unpolicing Childhood: Cultural Approaches to Anti-Child Disciplinary Violence in the Elementary Setting

Marquita D. Foster & Catherine Smith

Abstract

Nineteenth century western beliefs about race and gender ushered in the concept of othering, in which non-white individuals were viewed and treated as subhuman and dangerous. Concurrently, the shifting concept of childhood buttressed the notion that innocence and purity were qualities most associated with and demonstrated by children from the dominant culture. As organizations tend to reflect societal values, beliefs and fears, school became a major institution designed to mold children into responsible and moral citizens. This symbolic social contract between society and school has come to reinforce childism--a form of oppression against children who have been othered. We assert that in schools, childism is evidenced as anti-Blackness and anti-Black child sexism. In this paper, we examine childism and share the narratives of Black elementary educators who resisted anti-Black childism and disrupted disciplinary violence in the elementary setting with cultural approaches.

Keywords: *anti-Blackness, anti-Black child sexism, Black narratives, childism, disciplinary violence*

Introduction

Let your motto be resistance! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance.

—Henry Highland Garnet

The bodycam footage published by the *Orlando Sentinel* was gut-wrenching. It replayed the arrest of 6-year-old Kaia Rolle, who was perp-walked out of her school by a police officer on September 19, 2019 for kicking an assistant principal during a tantrum (Toohey, 2020). “I don’t want handcuffs on, no, please, help me,” Kaia cried, as zip ties were tightened around her wrists.

The video showed three school employees, visibly shaken, questioning the necessity of the “restraints.” The arresting officer—responding that had Kaia been “bigger,” then she would have been put into handcuffs—moved on to boast that she had “broken the record” as the youngest person he’d ever arrested (Flores & Weisfeldt, 2020). Not only was Kaia physically controlled, but she was also charged with misdemeanor battery, transported to juvenile jail in a patrol car and her mugshot taken while she stood on a step stool (Sheets & Toohey, 2019). How did the school not foresee the outcome of its decision to address Kaia’s behavior in this manner? Their actions that day demonstrated a total disregard concerning the historical potential for violence against Black children by police, including school resource officers (SROs).

Kaia’s story made national news due to the extreme nature in which the school responded to a tantrum *and* as an example of a disciplinary response gone awry. More importantly, it reflected what a policed childhood *looks, feels, and sounds* like in school: adult aggression, depreciation, physical control, psychological abuse, and denial of protection. For us, it triggered memories of numerous, untold dehumanizing acts against Black children that we witnessed and regrettably participated in at an urban elementary school in Texas for several years. We served as the “crisis management team,” and were often summoned by teachers to remove disruptive students

and to counsel or calm them. On occasion, we restrained children, as we were trained to do, or we called upon SROs to intervene when our efforts at physical control failed or aggravated matters. We abandoned police intervention after two alarming incidents with special education students: a second grader, in the process of being restrained, told us it was “fun” to crawl down the hallway with an officer on his back; and a fourth grader, removed for disrupting class, put his hands behind his back, locked his wrists and yelled, “Y’all going to call the police on me? Call them then!” We already knew that using SROs could backfire and put students in harm’s way, especially our Black boys; but we did not expect that our actions normalized police assistance as an appropriate behavior intervention, that our actions actually caused some students to become desensitized to police authority on campus. Our fear became, what if our children responded in these ways to police outside of school or in their community?

In our many reflections afterward, we agonized over our feelings of complicity in normalizing school-sanctioned harm and struggled to reconcile our school responsibilities with our desire to be nurturing as Black women and mothers. These conversations would later prompt our study on the treatment of Black elementary children, with a specific interest in learning about educator actions to restore their humanity. For us, the issues were complicated, underpinned by the intersectionality of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1990) as well as the educative relationship between adults and children and the social construct of adult authority. It was through these complexities that we viewed Kaia’s case. While not overlooking her race or gender, we believed that Kaia’s status as a child allowed those adults to treat her like property and ignore her humanity. And bolstered by our experiences, we understood that school adults oppressed children because they were in a *social system* that minimized juvenile humanity and self-agency. We understood this phenomenon as childism, a prejudice against children, that can be substantiated by acts of physical control, emotional disregard, and dehumanization.

Current literature lacks research examining childism as an underlying ideological reason behind school-sanctioned disciplinary violence in the elementary setting. We contend that childism cannot exist apart from any societal infrastructure in which children exist. Thus, in this paper, we propose that childism—underpinned by sexism and racism—reveals itself as anti-Black childism and harms Black children in the school system. First, we examine research literature that illustrates how schools practice childism, which we theorize, becomes evidenced as *anti-Blackness* and *anti-Black child sexism*. Second, we explore Black children's resistance and their attempts to push back against childism and other forms of oppression. Finally, drawing from ongoing qualitative research around the nurturing work of Black elementary educators, we explore the themes of co-conspirator, cultural approaches to discipline, and role entrapment that emerged from analyzing Black narratives around disrupting educational-psychic violence. Of note, it was through these narratives that we learned that Black educators are conscious of anti-Black childism and resist it in specific ways.

Literature Review

The Question of Childism

Research on Black children in educational spaces usually points to sexism and structural racism as a determining factor in the disproportionate disciplinary violence perpetrated against them. Utilizing the definitional work of Chester Pierce and Gail B. Allen, we contribute to this research with an examination of childism as a foundational element underlying Black children's oppressive and brutal treatment. Though we are building our research on Pierce and Allen's specific examination of childism, we also wanted to review other scholars' work on childism to situate how it continues to unfold as a concept.

In the early 1970s, Pierce, a psychiatrist and professor at Harvard Medical School, coined childism and microaggression and discussed their dynamics in his seminal work *Childism* with Allen. Modeled on

an understanding of racism, sexism, and generationalism,¹ Pierce and Allen (1975) explained that in childism-

...[the child] is expected to accommodate himself to the adult-aggressor, and is hardly ever permitted to initiate action or control a situation. The vehicle for most adult action is micro-aggression; the child is...treated in such a way as to lower his self-esteem, dignity, and worthiness by means of subtle, cumulative, and unceasing adult depreciation... the child remains on the defensive, mobilizing constantly to conform and perform... [which] is not without cost, psychologically and probably physiologically. (p. 18, brackets added)

Pierce and Allen (1975) stated that childist practices did not result in physical violence but maintained that children were emotionally abused by parents, teachers, physicians, and policemen. Childism reflects an imbalance of power with the presumption of one group's superiority and another's inferiority. That is, adults protect their power, position, and privilege in society by ruling over and diminishing children; and, in this respect, "childism is the basic form of oppression in our society and underlies all alienation and violence" and allows for everyone to become an oppressor (of children) (p. 18, parentheses added). Thus, the spirit-murdering of children is precipitated by the denial of protection (Love, 2014) against physical and/or psychological violence.

They concluded this groundbreaking piece with suggestions for future research regarding childism within family conduct, interpersonal violence, and education. Since their work, research citing childism has explored the inhumane treatment of children amid social problems, such as sex trafficking, or the perceptions of children's value to adults in society. For example, Young-Bruehl (2012) compared childism to homophobia and declared that there have

1. Based on Bourdieu's concept of generation, generationalism refers to ageism, age discrimination, ageing and generational conflicts

always been societies that turned on their children. Barbre (2012) observed that in childist environments, children are isolated and punished because adults consider them property as well as burdens to society. Langan (2012) explained that childism has grown in the past 60 years because American children lack defenders of their rights. Hoffman (2013) concluded childism occurs when "...adults project onto children aspects of themselves that they cannot tolerate, such as their own debased immaturities" (p. 204). Medina-Minton (2018) illustrated that childism in America harkens back to the colonial period, evidenced by the 1646 Massachusetts Stubborn Child Act that allowed adults to murder children without legal penalty. More recently, in the last decade, childhood studies scholars have offered a different, more affirmative definition of childism. Case in point, Hall (2019) viewed childism as a circumstance in which children are equal to adults, as an explication of children's political agency, and as a framework in which "to critically restructure historically engrained norms of adultism" (p. 4). While we do not dispute or challenge the current definition, we have to acknowledge that our experiences as Black educators in an urban elementary school were more aligned with Pierce and Allen's examination of the phenomenon.

Moreover, in our experiences, we have found that childism is not just another form of abuse, discrimination, and oppression against children. Childism is not detached from racism and sexism but is so thoroughly intertwined and layered with racism and sexism that it appears indistinguishable from them. As with the concept of childhood, childism, in this respect, has been racialized and gendered in its application in the education system. The interlacing of childism with other forms of oppression may explain why the research on school discipline overwhelmingly extracts explicit racism or sexism. Children can be viewed as vulnerable, and we debated using this term as not to ignore the fact that children have power and exercise it quite openly. However, we agreed to use it in the manner that is recognized by the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) (2020):

as a group with insufficient power, resources, and other attributes to protect their own interests. Thus, we view children as a vulnerable population and contend that the more marginalized identities (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.) stacked on top of their status as children, the more susceptible they are to disciplinary violence.

Violence by Design?

In the late nineteenth century, sociologists viewed the education system as critical to social improvement through control (Spring, 2010). According to Durkheim (2012), the purpose of education was socialization that included the necessity of physical punishment in order to deter inappropriate behaviors and preserve the moral code and identity of the dominant culture. He stated, "For some, punishment is a simple way of preventing defections from the rule. We must punish the child, they say, so that he doesn't misbehave again and to prevent others from imitating him," (p. 161). Thus, a symbolic contract between society and school was established for the sake of maintaining social morality and order (Noguera, 2003). When children enter the school system, they and their parents, in essence, agree to concede some of their liberty and conform to expectations in order to become educated, moral and responsible citizens (Noguera, 2003; Spring, 2010). Every child and parent theoretically accept the terms of this contract when they enroll in school, but it is the *punishment for some* that has created a visibly separate and violent schooling experience for *certain children*. From this knowledge, we ascertain that childism cannot be largely peripheral in elementary because it supports the function of school as a steward of the dominant culture goals, values, and beliefs.

Policed Childhood. While many children's school experiences are filled with wonder, curiosity, love, and freedom, these experiences can be dependent on the types of schools children attend. We cannot deny that there is a different culture and climate that exist in Montessori's private or suburban schools than in public urban or rural schools. The fact is a child in an urban public school encounters more

oppressive discipline systems and police presence (Meiners, 2016), and this child more than likely is Black (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). Comparisons between prisons and urban schools are commonplace due to an overemphasis on orderly movement, obedience, policing, surveillance, punishment as well as diminished privileges, deprivation of individuality, mandatory uniform or dress codes (Brown-Martin, 2016; Hirschfield, 2008). According to Whitehead (2015), American public schools serve as microcosms of the police states:

[They] contain almost every aspect of the militarized, intolerant, senseless, overcriminalized, legalistic, surveillance-riddled, totalitarian landscape that plague those of us on the outside. (para. 3, brackets added)

More specifically, elementary schools implement rules, procedures, and punitive measures that closely mirror criminal institutions and have become noticeably dictatorial in structure (Leafgren & Bornhorst, 2016). Children, as young as three, are taught to line up in single file, bubbles in their mouths, hands by their sides, or behind their backs—and are rewarded for acting accordingly (Scott & Barrett, 2004). Like prisoners, these children must dress in the school-designated colored uniforms, shirts neatly tucked, and visible school badges, even in Pre-K (Meiners, 2007). “A quiet, orderly school” can signal over-policed behaviors throughout the campus where every adult in the building is an oppressor and an enforcer. Nonetheless, the means to arrive at quietness and orderliness (albeit violent or punitive) result in socialization. It was under these conditions in our school that we understood selective socialization (i.e., punishment for some) as expressions of anti-Blackness and anti-Black child sexism.

Anti-Blackness

Boutte and Bryan (2019), citing Woodson (1933), stated that “the lynching of the Black body starts in the schoolhouse,” which means—

that the disdain for, disgust of and violence enacted toward Black people are rooted in the schooling experiences of Black children. (p. 5)

The social constructions of race and Blackness (Jordan, 1968/2012; Omi & Winant, 1994) factor in the perceptions that Black school children require more violent socialization because they are somehow inferior.). The notion of white-skinned superiority that grew out of Europe in the fourteenth century (Kendi, 2017) ensured subjugation against Black-skinned children and denied their legitimacy as humans. We paired these ideas about race with Rollo's (2018) work on the color of childhood in which he noted—

anti-Black racism is derived from the naturalized position of subordination and violence that children have traditionally occupied in European social and political orders. Black peoples, especially youth, are exposed to violence precisely because they are viewed as children. (pp. 308-309)

However, in examining anti-Blackness, we found contrasting reasons for the violent socializing or disciplining of Black children: They endure harsher treatment in school because they are children but also because, contrarily, *they are not considered children*. The belief of Black children as willful, dangerous, and inferior “miniature adults” remains unchanged from the sixteenth century view of child-as-adult and child-as-evil; and Black childhood is perceived as indistinguishable from Black adulthood (Cunningham, 2014; Jenks, 2005; S. Patton, 2014). The idea that Black children are not even children—in the physiological or social sense—is the epitomical expression of childism.

Furthermore, as noted by Vargas and James (2013), because Black children are perceived as “corrupted little adults” or “animalistic sub-humans,” it is believed that they do not experience pain or agony the same as white children. This societal perception tends to justify their less than humane treatment within our social infrastructure (Meadows-Fernandez, 2020; S. Patton, 2014; Waytz et al., 2015). In this respect, Black children receive more oppressive disciplinary violence because they can physically and emotionally take it.

In our experiences, the beliefs about Black inferiority become evident in what we call anti-Black program violence. That is, character

education programs (i.e., selective socialization) which serve to “build good habits” in Black children (McDermott & Nygreen, 2013). The benefit of innocence and good character is given primarily to white, able-bodied, middle-class children (Kehily, 2008). While paternalistic programs, such as the popular *Character Counts!* are often framed as teaching social skills that support a positive learning environment regardless of schools’ geographic locations (e.g., suburban, urban, etc.), they are often deemed instrumental to improving behavior and learning for urban Black and Brown students (Jeynes, 2019; Whitman, 2008). In our school, the character education tactic of “catching (Black) students being good” seemed to mimic the pervasiveness of the white gaze and Jim Crow strategies of policing or surveillance (Rickford, 2015).

As Black culture is considered deficient as compared to Eurocentric, Judeo-Christian societies (Ladson-Billings, 2009), character or moral education programs can strip Black children’s ethnic fibers away and force them to adhere to dominant culture views of acceptable expressions of behaving and learning in order to realize success, equal opportunity, and inclusion (Dawkins & Braddock, 1994). The school system’s attempts to assimilate Black children, fix them or save them from the perceived disadvantages of their culture require systemic violence: In exchange for an “equitable” education, Black children need to succumb and surrender their Blackness by enduring racism, disparate school discipline, and inequitable justice. When school policies, practices, and programs cannot coerce Black children into demonstrating the behavior expectations of the classroom, they get labeled troublemakers and are pushed out of school and into the juvenile justice system (Ferguson, 2000; Raffaele, 2003; M. Morris, 2016). These actions reinforce and normalize the school-to-prison pipeline.

Though Black children represent just 15% of the student population in American public schools (de Brey et. al., 2019), they are suspended up to 3.5 times more than students of other races or ethnic groups (Arcia, 2007; Hinojosa, 2008; Skiba & Williams, 2014;

U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Several studies reveal that Black students are disciplined more often than white students for committing the same “offenses” and for behaviors that are stereotypically associated with Black children such as loud talking (Kinsler, 2011; Skiba et al., 2000; Skiba & Williams, 2014). These types of offenses serve as racial microaggressions.

Anti-Black Child Sexism. Furthermore, we view the specific sex- or gender-based prejudice against Black girls and Black boys not as sexism because sexism does not reflect the impact of race and anti-Blackness. Black boys and girls are gendered differently and therefore treated differently from white girls and boys. Again, this reflects the complexity of the interlacing of childism with other forms of oppression. To us, it is more appropriate to refer to a specific *anti-Black child sexism*. Pierce and Allen (1975) noted that an operation of childism is forcing children to accept adults’ timetable of progress toward sexual maturity and independence. We argue this operation relates to the reconceptualization of childhood meant to keep white children asexual and dependent as long as possible in order to sustain their innocence.

In anti-Black child sexism, Black girls and boys face violence and oppression because of racist perceptions about their sex or gender. Black girls are not considered feminine or ladylike; rather, they are viewed as aggressive, sassy, sexually experienced and needing less protection and nurturing, even in elementary grades (Epstein et al., 2017; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Fordham, 1993; E. Morris, 2007). Disproportionate discipline data across the nation point to a clear bias in school-sanctioned violence against Black girls. Black girls face punitive discipline six times higher than white girls (Annamma, et al., 2019). Black girls are suspended and expelled two to three times more than white girls for minor offenses such as disrespect and inappropriate dress (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; E. Morris & Perry, 2017). And according to Wun (2016), Black girls in elementary and secondary schools are suspended more than girls from any other race or ethnicity and more than white and Asian boys.

The research on the gendered violence against Black boys is substantial. Black males are seen as representing a constant threat and danger to society, no matter their age. Because Black males are viewed as older and menacing to adults, especially to policemen, they do not represent the image of boyish childhood as do their same-age white male peers (Goff et al., 2014; Varela & Moore, 2014). The disciplinary violence against Black boys begins early, in preschool. Based on a Yale Child Study conducted by Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti & Shic (2016), preschool teachers spent more time gazing at or tracking Black boys in anticipation of disruptive behaviors than they did all other children, leading to high suspension and expulsion of Black boys under the age of five. The practice of surveilling and punishing Black boys for what they might do continues throughout elementary school because Black boys appear to become more dangerous, troublesome, and challenging as they get older (Ladson-Billings, 2011). More importantly, because Black boys are feared by teachers, the police, and society at large, their lives are in danger within and outside school.

In our experiences, childism demonstrated as anti-Black child sexism resulted in the most physical violence against Black children. Some of the most troubling conversations that we had with our teachers involved them “putting their hands” aggressively on their students when using their “teacher voice,” proximity control or redirection did not produce the desired student behaviors. Teachers pushing, blocking, dragging, and hitting students, in moments of frustration, were common and often resulted only in additional classroom management training.

Black Children’s Resistance

We felt that it was important to discuss Black children’s resistance to posit that some misbehavior could actually be responses to childism and other forms of oppression. Resistance by Black students and Black teachers has always been a tool in Black liberation efforts from enslavement to Jim Crow to Trumpism. The history of Black education in America is pregnant with acts of resistance that were

necessary to expose inequities and battle for rights. Therefore, it was no surprise to us that for some Black students, agency was most often apparent in their resistance (Miron & Laura, 1998).

Many days when we were called on to go into classrooms, we found that we were removing the same students, so much so that we started calling them “repeaters” or “frequently flyers.” Sometimes, when we got the call, we already knew which students were “in trouble” because we knew which teachers struggled with behavior. Once we came through the classroom door, we often saw these students’ heads drop or their eyes roll, their bodies swelling with frustration and embarrassment.

In those angst-filled walks to my office or Catherine’s classroom, the removed students told us the same stories, made the same complaints, or asked the same questions. It was never them, it was the teachers. The teachers were unfair, mean, and didn’t treat them right. Why were they in trouble? Why didn’t we ever get onto the teachers? We knew that most of these students were right to protest their treatment, but we also understood that our school policies and practices demanded student conformity. Recognizing that these Black students had agency, in our experiences, did not align with the school goals and expectations. We learned during these walks with students that getting in trouble happened when they shared their funds of knowledge (Gonzales et al., 2005) to explain how they answered questions, showed frustration with a teacher-imposed strategy, or expressed their lack of comprehension with a particular academic standard or concept. In fact, these students’ attempts to become a part of the classroom or engage the teacher for help often led to their getting removed.

These efforts made us aware that Black children recognize prejudice, racism, and oppression in the school system. According to Collins (2009), many Black students may appear submissive but are angry and rebellious—

When kids figure out that the teachers are using their voice of authority to uphold a hidden curriculum that reproduces

inequality, they can see teachers as all part of one huge conspiracy of lies. (p. 112)

The students awareness brings on their resistance. As noted by Dumas and ross (2016), Black children's resistance often results in misconceived notions that they are naturally bad and dysfunctional. According to Johnson, Boyden, and Pittz (2001), when urban Black students resist or act out/on their frustrations with academic or behavior programs, the school system blames them for their oppression and educational failure instead of institutional practices because it distracts attention from structural inequities "while protecting systems and bureaucracies from sustained criticism" (p. 8). Rather than address the inequities, the school system responds by criminalizing student resistance, which is reflected in the disproportionate disciplinary rates between Black and white students for the same behaviors.

With young Black children, resistance should be a clear signal that something is wrong in the learning environment, not with them. Too often, we were asked to use Response to Intervention (RtI) to assess what was "wrong with the repeaters," and initiate special education or psychological testing or evaluations, if necessary. We viewed these students in the same manner that Shalaby (2017) noted, in that—

[the] troublemakers are the caged canaries, children who are more sensitive than their peers to the toxic environment of the classroom that limits their freedom, clips their wings, and mutes their voices. The canaries' songs warn us of the dangers —dangers to children's learning and development, to their self-worth, to their physical health and emotional well-being —as the misbehaving children struggle for visibility and voice in an institution that works to ensure their invisibility. (xiii, brackets added).

With the knowledge that our children were alerting us to structural oppression, policing, and prejudice in our school, we saw an opportunity to learn through research how to better inform our

practices not only as crisis management team members but also in providing teacher support. We wanted to be able to offer struggling teachers different ways of engaging with student behavior because the traditional classroom management strategies were not working or were being weaponized to remove resisting children from their classrooms.

What began as informal focus groups and one-on-one teacher conversations eventually led to a qualitative pilot study in which we recruited Black teachers and collected stories about positive, cultural or alternative approaches to student behavior in Pacific ISD², a predominantly Black school district in Texas. Our research in this district was significant for two reasons: 1) to illustrate how childism is embedded in *all school systems* through discipline policies and 2) to show that childism evidenced as anti-Blackness and anti-Black child sexism can exist in predominantly Black school systems, even in subtle, unintentional ways. Recognizing this paradox was not an attempt to indict Black educators but to point out the racist American school system in which Black educators work. In fact, this acknowledgement was key to understanding why and how Black teachers' resist anti-Black childism on their campuses.

Theoretical Framework

Given the complexity of childism, we used BlackCrit as our theoretical framework to guide our research and analysis of oppression, marginalization, violence, and intersectional identities. In the 1970s, Bell (1995) began utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT) to position the social construction of race as central to the oppression experienced by Black people. However, while CRT alone would be apropos, we found BlackCrit provided a pertinent theoretical lens because it highlights how anti-Blackness informs and facilitates racist and institutional practice (Dumas & ross, 2016). According to Dancy, Edwards, and Davis (2018), anti-Blackness is reproduced in institutions that

2. Pseudonym

treat the Black body as property. BlackCrit helps analyze how social and education policies legitimize violence and oppression against Black children in the school system (Dumas, 2014). And finally, as noted by Coles and Powell (2020), BlackCrit serves “to make sense of school suspensions of Black youth in the context of specific violence against Black bodies through U.S. history” (p. 118). This disciplinary violence in the school system reflects problems rooted in America’s own unresolved handling of slavery and post-colonialism.

Furthermore, BlackCrit, like other critical theories, is situated in paradigms that focus on power and the site of oppression (Grbich, 2012), critique oppressive conditions and attempts to change those conditions (Collins, 1990), and incorporate storytelling as a methodology (Evans-Winters, 2019; Matsuda, 1995). (Counter)storytelling, as defined by CRT, challenges the perceptions and beliefs found in the master narratives of the dominant culture about race, gender, and class (Collins, 1990; Matsuda et al., 1993; Takaki, 2008). We refer to the stories in our study as Black narratives to place the emphasis on the collective racial identity of our storytellers as well as to center the individuals within their discourse. More specifically, Black narratives highlight the experiences of Black teachers’ interactions and relationships with their Black students.

Methods

As the crisis management team, we conducted many informal focus groups and interviews at Waterfall Elementary³ from 2014 to 2016 with 14 early childhood teachers. We initially focused on them because they were the first to sound the alarm about student behaviors in the Pre-K program. However, we determined that while they were a convenient participant group, we knew from their stories that they reflected poor sample quality for future research. For example, some of our Pre-K teachers, perhaps unknowingly, were instrumental in determining the trajectory of anti-child practices throughout the

3. Pseudonym

entire campus. How they treated, labeled and discussed the behaviors of Black boys and girls with their colleagues was often reinforced and sustained in later grades. As our knowledge and skills with planning and conducting narrative research improved, we realized that utilizing convenience sampling was limiting and ill-fitting for our research because participants were not representative of the population. We had to be more strategic in selecting participants if we wanted our research to be useful and meaningful.

Sampling and Participants

Despite a series of interruptions to our process of recruiting participants in fall 2017, we were able to recruit 11 Black educators from grades kindergarten through 5th through snowball sampling (M. Patton, 2014) and purposive sampling (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). We conducted semi-structured interviews and selected five participants who never wrote discipline referrals and reported having little to no classroom disruptions.

In fall 2018, we began to collect narratives from the five participants. However, I left Pacific ISD to become a graduate student while Catherine remained in the district. It was also at this time we decided to make our research more formal by designing it as a pilot study with an IRB and to share our data with a broader, targeted audience: Black educators in predominantly Black school districts.

By spring 2019, we employed purposive sampling once more to select an additional participant, which brought our sample size to six. We split the responsibilities of scheduling and meeting with the participants and asking them to write about their recent experiences and interactions with Black children. After analyzing and discussing their reflections, we selected three participants (see Table 1) whose responses revealed their resistance to childist practices as well as an understanding of the importance of Black culture on a Black child's social development and identity. Though research supports that the longer elementary teachers remain in the classroom, the greater their preference for controlling classroom-management practices (Ünal & Ünal, 2012), this was not the case in our study.

Table 1
Participants’ profiles

Name	Campus	Grade	Years of Experience
Mrs. Wright	Waterfall Elementary	3rd	19
Mr. Smith	Lake Elementary	5th	5
Mrs. Lewis	River Alternative School	3rd–5th	22

Context of the School District

Pacific ISD is an urban school district with approximately 8000 students and its own police department that requires SROs to routinely monitor safety and security at each of its ten campuses. It is one of the highest performing districts in North Texas based on state assessment results for reading and math (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2019a). It is a Title I district because of the high enrollment of economically disadvantaged students. The overall student population is 90% Black, 7% Hispanic/Latino, and 2% white. Black teachers represent 86% of school employees, Hispanic/Latino teachers 15%, and white teachers 3%. District leadership, including central office, is 98% Black.

According to TEA (2019b), Waterfall Elementary served approximately 530 students, 94% of them were Black. Lake Elementary served approximately 650 students, with an 85% Black student population. There was no student demographic data available for River because it is an alternative education program, not a comprehensive campus. Finally, we wanted to use PEIMS discipline data reported to the Texas Education Agency, but most discipline numbers were masked to comply with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and to prevent imputation.

Data Collection and Analysis

In spring and summer 2019, Mrs. Wright, Mr. Smith, and Mrs. Lewis participated in two recorded 60-to-90-minute semi-structured

talks (Few, Stephens & Rouse-Arnett 2003) and two recorded 30-to-45 minute follow-up talks at off-campus locations, around the following questions:

- 1) What are your perceptions of Black children?
- 2) In what ways do you address their behavior and why do you use these methods?
- 3) How do you view yourselves as educators of Black children?

Because of our insider/outsider status, we needed to build trust with our participants, so we decided to engage them in conversations or talks and stopped referring to our meetings as interviews. We knew that to teachers, interviews could come across like investigations or post-conferences. Also, with Black participants, in particular, due to a history of exploitative qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Marcuse, 2013), we wanted and needed to be collaborative, nonjudgmental, and personable. To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of our study, we engaged in data triangulation (Denzin, 1978) by asking our participants to bring teacher artifacts (e.g., lesson plans, student work) to their talks and share stories connected to each artifact. However, we do not present our analyses of the artifacts in this article.

Due to time constraints and our obligations to other projects, we were not able to conduct observations during 2019. By spring 2020, we began to schedule observations, but the COVID-19 pandemic halted all direct, in-person research. Nonetheless, we feel that the data collected prior to COVID-19 provide a substantial beginning to understanding childism and establishing the value of alternative or cultural approaches to disciplinary violence.

We engaged in member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) by making a copy for each teacher and asking them to check them for accuracy, and we utilized thematic analysis to pursue a more in-depth explanation of word usage in the talks. Thematic analysis can be described as determining what “patterns” or “themes” emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following section provides coherent though abbreviated results of our study.

Findings

The strength of these findings is directly connected to the richness of the Black narrative. We examine the themes of co-conspirator, cultural approaches to discipline, and role entrapment that emerged from our data analysis. All three themes recognize that Black educators resist, disrupt, and reject policies and practices that bring emotional harm to Black children.

Recognizing the Need to be Co-conspirators to Ensure Black Children's Empowerment

Using Pierce and Allen's definition of childism (a prejudice that sanctions adult power, insists on child conformity, and perpetuates emotional abuse or humiliation), we found several examples in the Black narrative of anti-child policies and practices:

1. stifling children's voices with "no talking zones" in all common areas on campus;
2. reducing children's recess time as punishment, which ignored the importance of play in children's cognitive and social development;
3. withholding snacks from children as punishment or making children "work harder" on their assignments in order to receive food as a reward;
4. training teachers to restrain children as a means of crisis prevention;
5. allowing teachers to implement their own behavior strategies without getting approval from an administrator (e.g., not taking "bad children" on field trips if their parents could not chaperone).

When asked in follow-up talks about these incidents, Wright, Smith, and Lewis stated that these actions were a part of the school culture and were only challenged when parents complained. Mr. Smith added, "This was school. We didn't think of these things as harming kids."

It is important to note that their narratives also tended to frame these aspects as anti-Black. This did not change our perspective, as we already acknowledged that childism could be evidenced as anti-Blackness and anti-Black child sexism. They were aware that Black children were not seen as children who deserved the benefit of innocence. Mrs. Lewis noted: "When Black girls 'misbehaved,' some teachers saw them as being grown, disrespectful, and womanish. It was like a power struggle over who was the adult in the room." In Lewis' experience, the older Black girls looked, the more trouble they got into and the less likely teachers believed their explanations of events.

Mrs. Wright believed that the school system made it too easy to give up on children, particularly Black children.

I feel like some teachers invest what they think they can. Others just throw up their hands and say "this is too difficult. This is a problem child and I don't want to deal with them." They blame the child and they blame the parents. And none of the responsibility falls on the teacher. This is accepted adult behavior, but I feel as a teacher that child is your child and you should do everything that you can to reach them. We can't accept one teacher throwing their hands up. We all have to stop how Black children are mistreated.

Wright, Smith, and Lewis expressed the sentiment that if Black children were going to be able to navigate the oppressive nature of school, Black teachers had to not only invest in Black children's potential despite what their educational data reflected (disciplinary and academic), but also challenge normalized anti-child and anti-Black policies and practices to ensure that Black children are empowered.

As Collins (2009) noted, empowerment emerges when domination is resisted and personal, cultural or instructional dimensions of knowledge that perpetuate dehumanization and objectification are rejected. Collins (2009) asserted that Black children are aware that their schools are failing them and serve as untrustworthy gatekeepers out to miseducate

or control them. To resist the structural domain of anti-child, anti-Black schooling, Black children need to be given ownership of the spaces in which they learn. Classrooms can be made safe, *physically free spaces* for Black children by Black teachers serving as co-conspirators (Collins, 2009). Mc Kinney de Royston et al. (2021) noted that Black educators, having been Black children themselves in K-12 schools, recognize the need for safe spaces and protection against racialized harm, which is why they assume the risk of being co-conspirators.

Disrupting Childist or Institutional Practices with Cultural Approaches

We found one of the most significant ways in which Black teachers in this study served as co-conspirators was when they resisted mandated classroom management strategies or reframed behavior initiatives that reflected dominant culture views of behavior. Wright, Smith and Lewis disrupted policies and practices that they knew would not best serve their students. Mrs. Lewis stated bluntly, “We have to make some of this stuff [initiatives] work for Black kids because they’re looking at us, like, *what is this?*” After years in education, they have seen behavior programs come and go and get recycled, especially ones that are supposed to improve both behavior and learning. We learned from their narratives that they reconstructed their school’s discipline initiatives by reframing them with Blackness or Afrocentricity.

Black-Centered Restorative Practices. When administrators at Waterfall Elementary decided to implement restorative practices (RPs) to reduce classroom and campus disruptions to improve the learning environment, Mrs. Wright “bought in” immediately but realized that she needed to “add Blackness” to it. RPs are valuable tools for restoring or making corrections, but Mrs. Wright did not “use it like everyone else in the building.” She realized that her training consisted of showing her how to control the restorative process. In fact, she was given what amounted to a **manual** on restorative practices that consisted of “several pages” of steps and procedures. She stated:

How is that different from regular classroom management? So I empower my kids and let them do the circle and the mediation. I just facilitate, if they ask. It's not about them doing what I want or what they think I want. Also, I want them to use this time to heal. They come in here sometimes so down, so beat up.

Mrs. Wright's implementation of RPs incorporated communities of care. In the African tradition, communities of care come together to support Black children, protect them from dehumanization within and outside the school (Collins, 1990), and teach them how to nurture and empower other children. It is important to note that the circle or class meeting is a common practice in the community of care; however, Mrs. Wright ensured that her communities centered Black ways of responding to oppression, difficulties, or stress.

Case in point, she wanted her children to be transparent about their needs so that everyone was aware of how someone in their community was feeling. It became a community problem to solve. Mrs. Wright understood that Black children thrive on being a part of a community because it is cultural and oftentimes reflects how *Black families* address problems or concerns (Hale, 1986). In this respect, one person's troubles belong to everyone in the community because all are affected. Mrs. Wright noted:

We have no secrets in here. We have some kids who have behavior issues and we have those who are very good in their academics. Sometimes we can just tell when another person just needs a little extra love and a little more help. So what we're going to do is show that child a little more love.

According to Love (2016), because Black children experience spirit-murder every day through systemic, institutional anti-Black state-sanctioned violence, Black educators must act to create loving, healing environments where Black children's spirits thrive.

Afrocentric SEL. Mr. Smith's school added socio-emotional learning (SEL), character education, and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) all in the same year. He noted, "It seems like

every time we had a staff meeting, we were given a new initiative.” His school eventually implemented a popular SEL program. Socio-emotional learning (SEL) is the process of obtaining the ability to recognize and regulate behavior, form caring relationships with others, and make appropriate decisions (Zins & Elias, 2006), especially in stressful situations. However, Mr. Smith felt as though their SEL program focused too much on finding “something wrong” with Black children and giving them interventions that they didn’t need.

Current criticisms of SEL align with Mr. Smith’s concerns. These programs can perpetuate deficit thinking about Black children—that their behavior reflects the trauma “caused” by their culture or lived experiences, so schools use SEL to fix Black children (Foster, 2020). In addition, SEL can become another form of policing because SEL activities can be used to teach Black children to suppress their anger or pain even if they have been hurt or disrespected by adults in the school system (Kaler-Jones, 2020). Mr. Smith engaged SEL with an Afrocentric way of determining truths and becoming empowered: through oral storytelling. He shared:

I listen to my students. Something happens. I listen. In our community, talking and sharing our troubles are so important. Stories drive us. So when something happens with one of my kids, they get in trouble somewhere, I tell them to tell me the story. Now, that story may go around and around in five circles, but letting them tell their story can help them calm down and come up with solutions.

Oral storytelling is an African tradition. The most powerful act of Black resistance sustaining the culture and healing within the dehumanizing bounds of slavery was storytelling, singing, and music-making (Humes, 2016). While storytelling may sound simplistic, it elevates the Black child’s voice and thereby provides the power to control the narrative in the school system.

More importantly, this also allowed Mr. Smith to utilize the stories shared in class as lessons for all students. He found that his students’ stories were better than the “made up” SEL scenarios and

activities purchased by his school. Mr. Smith noted: "My students' stories are relevant and relatable and have more value in allowing my students to process how they would respond to real situations on this campus." Mr. Smith believed that using storytelling not only helped to improve decision-making and manage emotions but also to expose unfair discipline policies and practices on campus.

Othermothering. Mrs. Lewis' talks add significant knowledge to the literature because she teaches at an alternative education program (AEP), which, by design, is a site of punishment for students who violate the code of conduct. The target population for AEPs are disruptive students who must be removed from the comprehensive campus (Porowski, 2014). There does not seem to be any consideration that some students are pushed into AEPs due to disciplinary violence.

Mrs. Lewis' students naturally gravitated toward her because of her personality, but she mused, "At the alternative school, I become their second mom. I have to spend some time bringing them back to life." Othermothering is a respected Western African cultural practice in which mothers in a community share the responsibility of caring for children (Thompson, 1998). What allows Mrs. Lewis to be an othermother, not an enforcer within a carceral space, is that her principal has worked toward creating a nurturing environment for all students at River, especially the elementary children because of their age and psychological need for comfort.

Many teachers, regardless of race, may assume a maternal role in educating children; however, an othermother understands the complexities of the Black lived experience and her caring work is an emotional and a political act. They help heal, nurture, and advocate for the children in their classroom by addressing their social and psychological needs. They also uplift the Black community (Guiffrida, 2005). Mrs. Lewis explained:

I had one student who kept getting sent to ISS for disrupting class. After so many incidents, he was sent here. I shared with him that he was going to continue to go to

ISS because all people saw was another Black boy causing trouble, no matter what his reasons were. So I had to repaint the classroom like it was the world and teach him not to play into their hands. My goal is to help them not come back here.

In essence, Mrs. Lewis' acts of mothering empower her students to gain confidence, recognize their self-worth, and navigate the oppressive structures within the school system.

Rejecting Anti-Black Role Entrapment

We found this last theme especially significant to our study because the Black narratives seem to acknowledge that working in the education system cast Wright and Smith in the role of oppressors, to reinforce the goals of the symbolic contract between society and school. The socially constructed complicatedness of Black children was often quantified into concrete steps of "what to do or not to do" given to Wright, Smith, and their colleagues as classroom management training, instructional strategies, and workshops. The Black narratives reflected a historical context of using the Black body as a tool in white power structures. Being called or made role models or mentors caused Wright and Smith to endure heavy emotional and psychological labor in their relationship with their Black students. Because of the depth of anti-Black child sexism embedded in school policies and practices, the teachers in the study experienced difficulties in following their own "natural instincts" to nurture and care for all students in their classroom, especially the ones who presented challenges. A certain quandary existed: the desire to nurture versus the mandate to control and punish, which validates the experiences that we had on the crisis management team.

Mr. Smith noticed that most of his colleagues relied on his imposed role as the oppressor as the only Black male on his campus (Smith was one of two male educators at Lake Elementary). He was constantly being asked if the "bad kids" could stay with him.

Nationally, there are few Black male teachers in elementary education; and while schools could benefit from their perspectives and lived experiences, they are called upon to look after or mentor Black boys. Mentoring then can become another way to control and surveil Black children with the help of Black teachers (Madsen & Mabokela, 2000). Mr. Smith stated:

Black children's treatment in public school reminds me of slavery. Isn't that like what we do? I think my kids act out because they are fed up. I am not saying that this is the case for every Black kid who acts up but I talk to my kids a lot. They're not acting up for nothing. That's why I don't write referrals or call on the principal or the school officer. I'm not going to put them in the system.

He realized that putting them in the system (i.e., behavioral management system) led to his Black students establishing a discipline history which followed them as long as they were students in Pacific ISD. Smith knew that his administrators drew from these histories when "targeting" Black boys and girls for mentoring programs.

Because Mrs. Wright had so few discipline issues in her classroom at Waterfall Elementary, she not only had to be a role model for children, but she also had to mentor struggling teachers. Mrs. Wright noted-

I was told that I knew how to handle these kids, so why not help out. Yeah, I have the reputation for being tough but they don't understand that I'm not tough on my kids because I'm the teacher and the school lets me. I'm tough because I have high expectations and my children know it. I discipline them but I nurture them as well. That's what they don't see. All they see is calm and order in my room but they don't see the time I spend talking to my students, loving on them, and empowering them. When I tell them that's what I do, they don't believe me. Well, if they want somebody to show them how to control Black children, then they got the wrong one. I can't do that.

It is important to note that Black educators' disciplining and/or nurturing Black children can result in warring ideals within them (Du Bois 2005). On one hand, Black teachers might not view discipline as violence because disciplining children is associated with doing their jobs. On the other hand, they recognize oppression, discrimination, and violence when they see it because of their own lived experiences. Therefore, in order for Black teachers to reclaim their natural instincts to nurture Black children and protect them from violence and racism, they have to reject the roles that pit them against Black children or the affirming traditions of Black culture.

Discussion

We wish to restate that our work around childism is evolving, based on five years of interactions, conversations, observations and evaluations of teachers and children in the field. Our research does not intend in any way to suggest that oppressive treatment of children is not motivated by racism or sexism. We desire for our readers to understand that our research efforts arose because we interacted with teachers who exerted an unquestionable prejudice, bias, and dislike of children and utilized their adult status to subjugate them.

Though our research is in its nascent stages, we believe that this work has merit by demonstrating that a school system can retain an anti-child, anti-Black posture. It requires the collective participation from most adults who do not challenge childist practices, even if they believe that these practices are violent; who submit to educator-peer pressure and engage in childism to maintain the status quo; or, who display diffusion of responsibility when they witness anti-child disciplinary violence but assume another adult will intervene.

School is an anti-Black institution. We postulate that the symbolic social contract underpins childism because it maintains the dominant culture's perspectives on race and gender as related to other cultures' children. White, able-bodied, middle-class children are not held accountable for their misbehavior in the same way Black children are. Thus, we assert that the "un-childing" of Black

girls and boys is central to their brutalization and marginalization in the school system. To dismantle childism in the school system will take resistance and disruption. We cannot call for culturally affirming practices to improve academic achievement for Black children without recognizing the pervasiveness of childism and anti-Blackness in our discipline policies. We share Bettina Love's (2019) reflections on the wellness in schools, in which she noted-

I know from experience, from years of fighting, that school officials often feel the need to control Black bodies (students, staff, and parents) and schools can never be well under those circumstances. This control seems to stem from dark children always being seen as America's property. For schools to be well, and, therefore, the children in them, schools must place more importance on students' mental, physical, and spiritual health than on any test (p. 160).

The significance of the Black narrative for illustrating the experiences of Black educators with anti-child, anti-Black disciplinary violence in the school system. These narratives gave Black educators the space to share how they resisted, disrupted, and rejected the subtle or blatant efforts to control and humiliate Black children in policies and practices. Black narratives showed that it will take adult resistance to support Black children's humanity and self-agency, but they also revealed that the work of disruption cannot begin and end with the Black teacher. As Mr. Smith stated, "I still think it takes a village." Because anti-child and anti-Black views are reflections of racist and oppressive societal structures, *all adults* who engage with Black children are needed to confront and dismantle these structures —lest they accept, knowingly or not, their role in suppressing and harming Black children.

Conclusion

Elementary is one of the first places in which children become cognizant of a social structure or system that reflects how their society works and their worth to and in that society. While we believe that

schools strive to ensure a fair and equitable democratic schooling experience for every child, we would also like to acknowledge that there is more than one school system in the United States: one in which the rethinking and reimagining of discipline has elevated emotional learning, restorative practices, and social justice to the fore; and one where children still encounter educators who “lay down the law” in order to reduce disruptions to the learning environment. Recognizing the latter is crucial to addressing what is happening in early childhood education. Case in point, Texans Care for Children (2018), 64,773 elementary students were placed in in-school suspension (ISS), 36,475 in out-of-school suspension (OSS), and these suspended students were disproportionately in grades Pre-K through 2nd, Black, male, in special education, or in foster care.

Because of our experiences, we realized that early childhood was the critical time that had the potential to derail the rest of the educational careers of Black children—if there was a heavy reliance on zero tolerance and disciplinary violence. Thus, early childhood classrooms can become central to the policing and criminalization of childhood within the school system, especially Black childhood. Although ZTPs were designed to decrease school violence, they have immensely failed for twenty years to substantiate that discretionary or mandatory punishments have kept our schools safer (Skiba, 2014). With the implementation of ZTPs, elementary schools operate much like carceral institutions where policies and practices deliberately control bodies, limit spaces free from surveillance, and offer little to no emotional support.

Let your motto be resistance: It is important to reiterate that we were a part of the system that perpetuated disciplinary violence against Black children, and it was an obligation with which we were never comfortable. We believe that had we not encountered such violent experiences, we would not have seen the urgency in disrupting the practices that were clearly doing incredible emotional harm to Black children. This is why we feel our work is important for early childhood educators in predominantly Black schools.

The current trends of SEL and RPs are now widely advocated in all schools, but these programs come “as is,” which is racially and culturally neutral (Jones et al, 2017), and do not bring about the resistance and disruption needed to support Black children within anti-Black school systems. We believe in order to disrupt disciplinary violence against Black children, we need to not only reframe behavior initiatives to reflect Blackness or Afrocentricity but also allow Black teachers to assume other risks, such as becoming co-conspirators and rejecting role entrapment. Furthermore, we feel it is crucial to understand that hiring more Black teachers for Black students, in white or Black schools, means nothing if the teachers act as agents of oppression.

We hope that our research will add to the literature the importance of schools’ incorporating cultural approaches to anti-disciplinary violence as a vital way to counter the violence and oppression Black children endure. These cultural approaches and the collaborative disruption of Black educators all reflect a deliberate focus on Blackness because they reaffirm their students’ self-image, self-identity, and self-esteem. We also aspire for this work to be continued by other Black scholars and researchers and to include the voices and experiences of Black children. We hope that such future research will find space in teacher education programs, much like anti-racist education and abolitionist teaching. That’s how important we consider the issue of childism, in that pre-service teachers (PSTs), especially BIPOC PSTs, will have an opportunity to recognize and disrupt any childist mindsets and behavior before entering the classroom.

Finally, in addition to teachers, we believe counselors can also counter anti-Black violence, oppression, and policing by promoting the mental, emotional, and psychological well-being of Black children. Administrators can serve as advocates for change by normalizing culturally responsive teaching practices, Afrocentric social-emotional learning or restorative practices, and Black maternal practices such as othermothering. The harm and trauma caused by childism and anti-Blackness in the school system must be undone by school adults uniting in their roles as agents of empowerment.

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