Contemporary Perspectives on the Lives of Teachers

Daughters of (Re)Imagined Early Childhood Education

Reflective Narratives of Black Women Educators in Texas during COVID-19

Edited by

Meghan L. Green

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Contemporary Perspectives on the Lives of Teachers

Series Editors
Carol R. Rinke and Lynnette Mawhinney

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

Meghan L. Green EdD is an Assistant Professor at Erikson Institute in Chicago, IL. As an arts-based qualitative researcher, she uses multiple modes of creative representation to reflect on her positionality and to craft her story as a cis Black queer woman engaging in critically informed research methodologies within this time and space. Her scholarship centres Black feminist thought and endarkened feminist epistemology within early childhood settings, specifically highlighting the diverse lived experiences of Black early childhood educators through arts-based qualitative inquiry methods including, but not limited to, autoethnography, endarkened narrative inquiry, Photovoice, and poetic inquiry.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Krystle Dior Armstrong is a Special Education Co-Teacher, YMCA Group Leader, and full-time online student at Grand Canyon University, pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Behavioral Health. She is deeply passionate about advocating for individuals who are often overlooked, misunderstood, or living with disabilities and mental health challenges. After graduation, Krystle plans to step beyond the traditional classroom setting to develop accessible, personalized educational materials and behavioral resources. Her mission is to empower and uplift marginalized populations – meeting them where they are and helping them reach their fullest potential.

Myah Breaux is a former English Language Arts teacher who taught at the primary level in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex of Texas, where she also served as the English Language Arts Vertical Content Lead on her campus. Her experience in the classroom deepened her commitment to ensuring that all students have access to equitable, high-quality education. As a former educator, she firmly believes that literacy is a foundational tool for empowerment and opportunity: if you can read, you can do anything. She now works in the nonprofit sector, continuing to advocate for educational equity by supporting schools and communities through meaningful programs and partnerships.

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Bobbi Reagor Marshall, MA, is an early education teacher and graduate student at the University of Arizona Global Campus. She received her Master's degree in Early Educational Leadership in March of 2023 and continues her journey in building educational awareness in urban communities. Her vision is to allow families from all financial hardships to be able to place their children in early educational facilities that provide parent education, respect a child's creativity, cognitive, and social-emotional growth and builds a community that offers diverse learning.

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PREFACE

Stories matter. Perspectives matter. Critical race theorists leverage the multiple vantage points of historically marginalized people to find the balance in our everyday experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). My views on my maternal grandmother, whose formal schooling ended in the sixth grade, have been significantly shaped by my Black feminist worldview. She was a poor Black woman in south Louisiana in the 1940s who meticulously observed those around her and then used that knowledge to provide for her family. Her daily experiences helped her solve practical problems. She extended that compassion to those in her community who may have needed assistance as well. The practical life lessons she taught me often complement the academic knowledge I received in my doctoral classes.

As a researcher and early childhood teacher educator, I utilize Black feminist thought to extend this intergenerational bridge and to create a space intended to attest to how the lives of Black women like my grandmother are situated in the larger context of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. *Daughters of (Re)Imagined Early Childhood Education: Reflective Narratives of Black Women Educators in Texas During COVID-19* provides a look into the narratives of Black women in north Texas who brought themselves fully into early learning settings from 2020 to 2022. It is important to ground the present work in the historical context of social activism in response to systemic anti-Black police violence.

Historical Context of Police Brutality and Social Activism in the United States

Aiello (2023) noted that the history of police brutality in the United States (US) began with slave patrols as 'white authorities used violence against Black lives and bodies as a form of containment for slave labour' (p. 3). Scholars have long considered the connection between local forms of political activism in Black communities and race-based police brutality in

the southern sector of the US (Aiello, 2023). Oftentimes, carceral aggression preceded Black residents' actions against longstanding mistreatment. As Black folks' calls for justice and equitable treatment amplified over the decades, police brutality in urban and rural areas across the south only increased. By the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it had become a common form of intimidation that was cemented into the fabric of law enforcement in the nation. Racialized policing (Aiello, 2023) impacted communities of Colour across the country during the height of social movements in the mid-to late-20th century. Institutionalized violence against Black communities in the US has consistently spurred protest movements advocating for the abolition of the carceral state (Carruthers, 2018). The narratives presented in this book align with the collective imagination Carruthers (2018) referenced as they are a part of our legacy of struggle as Black women and embody our commitment to liberation through service.

Amidst the uncertainty of a global pandemic and the audacious eruption of anti-Black racial violence in the US in 2020, my co-authors and I found strength in our bonds as educators on the same campus. These shared bonds – built initially on shared identity markers such as race and gender – developed over time due to our collective lived experiences during one of the most traumatic periods of our lives. To honour these bonds, I approached my co-authors with the opportunity to story our lived experiences as Black women early childhood educators in Fort Worth, Texas from 2020 to 2022. Walking in the spirit of my foremothers, I wanted to go beyond the confines of traditional narrative inquiry and to write authentically and bravely.

The purpose of this book was to provide a space for Black women early childhood educators' 'specialized bodies of knowledge' (Dillard, 2000, p. 664) that is often underappreciated in academic literature on teachers' lived experiences. Instead of simply presenting my interpretations as a researcher of these women's lives, the authors provided self-defined understandings of their pedagogical stances based on their experiences. Each of the chapters presented in this book represents a Black woman educator's truth. Black feminist thought allows us to examine how Black women manage the everyday tasks of life despite the challenging situations we find ourselves in. Our knowledge may or may not be the result of formal avenues of education. Our communal funds of knowledge could even be understood as preferential (Acosta, 2019; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Walker, 1983).

Black Feminist Thought

As the 19th century ended and the 20th century emerged, Black women pushed forward towards defining our version of womanhood (Giddings, 2001). The formation of clubs for Black women was less about fitting neatly

into white women's previously conceived notion of femininity and more about acknowledging the necessity of an exclusive affinity space (Collins, 2000; Giddings, 2001). By the mid-20th century, Black women created and sustained powerful social justice activist organizations, such as the National Council of Negro Women, for decades. Although Black women held some positions of power during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the undercurrent of sexism within this liberation movement was ever present (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1981; Giddings, 2001; Smith, 1979; Wallace, 1982). From strategizing with political leaders to physically supporting and caring for their comrades to standing on the frontlines during protest efforts, Black women's contributions to the Civil Rights movement are immeasurable.

These contributions set the stage for the creation of a new formal school of thought. A school of thought that centred the needs and lived experiences of Black women. A school of thought that, as Audre Lorde (1984) eloquently expressed, would help to channel Black women's feelings about existing in a world 'which hates our very existence outside of its service' (p. 122). Collins (2000) examined the following tenets of Black feminist thought: (a) an understanding of the connection between experience and consciousness; (b) a legacy of struggle; (c) self-defined standpoint fostered by experience; (d) essential merger of intellectual work and activism; (e) recognition of changing dynamics; and (f) a commitment to universal struggles against oppression. Black feminist thought filled the echo chamber of critical social theory by providing a context for a liberation movement that was centred around multiple sites of oppression: (a) race, (b) gender, (c) sexual orientation, and (d) class.

The Combahee River Collective was founded in 1974 by a group of radical Black feminists, including Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier (Taylor, 2019). The essence of the Combahee River Collective's (1982) argument was that Black girls become aware of the impact of their gender on their experiences within their communities as a rite of passage. This shared consciousness developed because of similar experiences. Black feminist thought promotes the consideration of how thoughts shape one's actions (Collins, 2000). As Black women critically self-reflect on our place in the world around us, we come to appreciate the beauty provided by the range of our experiences as well as the power embedded in the common threads of our existence (Smith, 1979).

Crenshaw et al. (1995) defined intersectionality as 'the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions' of Black women's social and political lives (p. 1244). Intersectionality seeks to provide space for overlapping of experiences in American society. What happens when a Black woman must consider her race and gender when engaging with systems of oppression? How does her sexual identity or religious affiliation affect how others interact with her? When the civil rights

of a racial group are seen as a broad, single issue as opposed to a complex spider web of entangled familiarities, the unique needs of the most disregarded individuals get taken for granted and unaddressed (Crenshaw, 1991). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) asserted that intersectionality and anti-essentialism serve as the mirrors that critical race theorists use to look inward and critically '[examine] the interplay of power and authority within minority communities and movements' (p. 51).

Importance of the Current Work

Researchers have found that Black women educators' counter-narratives often included the following themes: (a) teaching as a lifestyle and a public service, (b) discipline as expectations for excellence, (c) teaching as othermothering, (d) relationship building, and (e) race, class, and gender awareness (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Case, 1997; Casey, 1993; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Dillard, 2020, 2022; Dillard & Neal, 2020; Dingus, 2006; Dixson, 2003; Howell et al., 2019; Watson, 2017; Whyte & Delaney, 2023; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2021). Educational researchers have employed critical theoretical perspectives to examine how intersecting social constructs such as race, class, gender, etc. contribute to the ways in which we educate children in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 1998). We must study hard in the present and learn the lessons meant for us to carry into our future as we reflect on how we have been impacted by our past.

I am a third-generation educator. My paternal grandmother and my mother educated thousands of students over their combined 80 years of teaching. The impact of their service to my south Louisiana community is longstanding. I have been an educator for almost 20 years. My teaching philosophy has been heavily shaped by my academic training as well as the realities of my lived experiences as a cis Black queer femme presenting being. It is from these sites of being and knowing that a 'passion of experience' emerges as hooks (1994, p. 91) suggested. In addition, hooks described this notion of the privilege of having gone through the things that one seeks to offer an opinion on. This idea exists between the concepts of essentialism and anti-essentialism. I identify as a cisgender Black woman. This does not mean that my experiences speak to the experiences of all Black women. How we bring ourselves into educational settings as educators is influenced by several factors.

The authors in *Daughters of (Re)Imagined Early Childhood Education* explored the intersections of these factors through counter-narratives (Pérez, 2017). Ladson-Billings (2009) described how Black women are often type-cast as mammies, sapphires, and jezebels in popular film representations and went on to explain how these socially constructed misrepresentations are connected to the lack of counter-narratives about the lived experiences of Black

women teachers in academic literature. How we see ourselves in relation to our students and the world around us influences how we connect with those students. Reflective practitioners take the time to consider how their actions contribute to the outcomes of their work. This critical self-reflection often prompts some form of dynamic change as the educator begins to understand how they bring themselves into their classrooms and how the intersections of their identity impact their efficacy as teachers. Narrative inquirers maintain that simply analyzing the numbers through quantitative methods fails to fully capture the essence of what occurs across time and space in educational settings (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Craig, 2011; Kim, 2016). Cook and Dixson (2013) affirmed the power of considering contextual factors in narrative inquiry while crafting composite counter-stories based on the narratives provided by Black educators in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina.

Endarkening Narrative Research

Telling Black women's stories requires epistemological and methodological shifts towards critical social theories, such as *endarkened feminist epistemology*, that '…transmit necessary information, encourage dialogue, and maximize possibilities for the co-creation of knowledge' (Davis, 2015, p. 155). Dillard (2000) formulated the concept of endarkened feminist epistemology, defined as the articulation of:

> How reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women. (p. 662)

This book offers seven Black women early childhood educators' counter-narratives in our own words. Guided by the tenets of Black feminist thought and endarkened feminist epistemology, *Daughters of (Re)Imagined Early Childhood Education* approached narrative inquiry through a culturally situated lens that centres Black women's ways of being and knowing (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023; Turner, 2024).

Voices of Black Women Educators: Outline of Chapters

Our voices are central to the spirit of the present work as our stories are a collection of life notes (Dillard, 2000) – narrative representations that can be understood as 'embodying the meaning and reflections that consciously attend to a whole life as it is embedded in sociocultural contexts

and communities of affinity' (p. 664). Each counter-narrative or life note was based on the author's responses to the following provocations.

- Describe what you were doing when the COVID-19 pandemic first hit Texas in March/April 2020. Feel free to write about in school out and of school occurrences.
- What were your experiences as a teacher like during the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years?
- What was it like teaching during the pandemic?
- Describe your reaction to the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020.
- How were you impacted by the heightened focus on racial justice across the United States at this time?

As authors developed their life notes, we met on Zoom individually and collectively to discuss how our stories were emerging. These collective gatherings, or sister circles (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011), served as our support system during the writing and editing process. We often discussed our hopes for this project and exchanged words of encouragement. Our informal gatherings inspired the types of storytelling experiences that provide listeners with the ability to 'open their hearts as well as their minds and listen attentively to stories that feel raw, cut deep, and resist distance and abstraction' (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 206).

To exemplify the traditions of Black feminist thought and endarkened feminist epistemology, I made the editorial decision to structure the counter-narratives in ways that captured the multifaceted layers of the mosaic that is Black women's lives across time and space (Evans-Winters, 2019) – boldly pushing back against the dominant discourse in academic literature. The reader will notice that the counter-narratives are intentionally written in an informal and conversational tone to 'literally [put] ourselves and our understandings of Black identities, notions of Black womanhood, and culture in the world in new and fuller ways' (Dillard, 2016, p. 411) as an act of (re)presenting our realities. Our life notes were grounded in the relational aspects of a Black/African-centred womanist onto-epistemology (Evans-Winters, 2019). Because each counter-narrative is meant to feel like a dialogue with a close friend, I subsequently refer to the authors by their first names to honour our relationships and sisterhood.

Each chapter in this volume begins with a brief introduction about the main threads of the life note. In Chapter 1, 'Letting Go to Grow', Bobbi begins by exploring how her relationships with her loved ones have shaped how she envisioned her role as a Black woman in early childhood education. She illuminates how the connections between her growth as a mother, daughter, sister, and partner have impacted her understanding of her

responsibility to justice and equity as an educator. Myah continues this introspective look into how Black women process our emotions during chaotic times in Chapter 2, 'Shifting and Blooming'. Her story spotlights Black women educators' need for reflective spaces and quiet moments to ponder what moves one should make next.

The next two chapters of *Daughters of (Re)Imagined Early Childhood Education* shift to the theme of spirituality and testimony. Culturally situated narrative inquirers engaged in *endarkened narrative inquiry* (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023) and *endarkened feminist narrative* (Turner, 2024) have noted how Black women's narratives are often characterized by an underlying spiritual refrain. In Chapter 3, 'Destiny Detours', Krys details her experiences as a multiracial Black woman in north Texas and as a mother of two daughters. She expounds on her passion for special education and her desire to follow the meanders and bends of her faith. After ruminating on the unexpected junctions in her life, Alexis resolved that she had endured certain difficulties for a grander purpose. Her spirituality guides Chapter 4, 'Unsolicited Favour' and unearths a parable that centres the value of sitting still in the valley as we wait for what comes next.

The final three chapters of the text provide lessons on the complexities Black women educators face balancing the task of saving our own lives while caring for those around us. As we juggle the day-to-day expectations and generations of compassionate protection, how are we venerating the divinity that resides inside of us (Dillard, 2022)? Carson begins this conversation with an honest memory of her maternal grandfather and the impact of stigmas around mental health have had on Black communities. In Chapter 5, 'Question Everything, Always Speak Up', she describes how her first encounters with misogynoir occurred in her home as a Black girl. Stress tends to create situations where choices seem unfathomable – you struggle to maintain your composure while grasping tightly onto what used to be. Deidra chronicles what it was like to care for multiple generations and teach first grade during the COVID-19 pandemic in Chapter 6, 'A New Respect'. She shares her battles with anxiety and advances the narratives we have on how Black women educators continued to (re)create images of resiliency during vexing seasons. Chapter 7, 'Rock Steady: An Autoethnography Exploring My Lived Experiences During Dual Pandemics' is grounded in two of the fundamental principles of Black feminist thought – (a) the understanding of the connection between experience and consciousness and (b) the development of Black women's self-defined standpoints based on our experiences. In the closing chapter, I present my love letter to the Black women educators who simultaneously helped me mourn life as we knew it and celebrate the opportunity to nurture our wildest freedom dreams.

When asked to define caring in relation to students, Bass (2012) found that Black women educational leaders often used phrases that signalled a mothering and/or othermothering demeanour. Participants in her qualitative study

discussed how their commitment to Black and Brown children extended beyond their regard for their personal well-being. Black women educational leaders exemplified this ethic of risk (Bass, 2012) through their actions before, during, and after the school day. The authors in this volume also demonstrated this communal ethic of caring (Green, 2023) throughout their interactions with children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each story in *Daughters of (Re)Imagined Early Childhood Education: Reflective Narratives of Black Women Educators in Texas During COVID-19* matters and provides insight into how each of us makes meaning of the world. In this sense, the chapter authors' stories work together to seamlessly illustrate the synergy provided by an intersectional critique whereby one considers how multiple sites of identity shape lived experiences and foster our hopes for a radical future.

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ADDITIONAL READING

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CHAPTER 1

LETTING GO TO GROW

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ABSTRACT

Our relationships with those closest to us form the foundation of how we move in the world. Black women educators often curate relationships with their students that model the care and concern we want shown to our loved ones. Bobbi's story echoes this desire to be the kind of early childhood educator that her son and daughter would be proud of. In this chapter, she shares how her journey towards becoming the best version of herself was built on her passion for advocating for the well-being of the people she loved most and trusting in the process of growth.

Keywords: Family relationships; personal growth; self-advocacy; parenting and education; community building; empathy in teaching

INTRODUCTION

When someone asks to define me, I often ponder for a while on that question. Who am I, really? Does anyone know how to answer that question? I typically answer, 'Should I begin with whom I imagined I would be, or whom I am becoming?' I grew up in Dallas, Texas with my mom and stepdad. My parents worked hard, but they worked for corporate America. I remember an abundance of conversations I would have with my mom surrounding

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career choices. She would say to me, 'Please do not get a job working in a little cubical area where no one appreciates what you do. Go to school, study something that you know the world will always need, and make sure you are happy!' I did not quite understand that as a middle school student, but I did know what it felt like to be underappreciated for your hard work.

I do not have a close relationship with my dad. This is due to the choices he has made to be in and out of my life. Now that I have a family, I'm more protective of myself and my kids. When we were close, our conversations would intel the secrets to surviving the work world, facing challenges, reaping those rewards, and retiring early. As I look back on what he has done for me, I learned how to work through heartache, work through trusting others, and learn that regardless of someone being family, they aren't always fit to be in your life. That can be a hard pill to swallow when it's your mom or dad. Now that I am married to my amazing husband, he has shown me through my daughter how a dad is supposed to have a relationship with his daughter.

My mom yearned for me to be successful, but if it were my choice, being an educator was not in my future. My mom often told my sister and I to 'find a job in education or the medical field, because those are two careers that will never go away'. I wanted to find a good job, make money, mind my business, and repeat. I took a few courses in anatomy and physiology which made me anxious and full of doubt. So, I embarked on a career in teaching, and it has been the challenging and rewarding place that my mom always wanted for me. When I have conversations with my kids about careers, I simply tell them, 'The important thing is for you to be happy in what you do. Just remember your morals, and values, and always advocate for yourself and others'.

Figure 1.1 below is a depiction of my state of teaching. It describes the excitement, passion, and purpose-driven teacher I am today. It also shines a light on my reality and how I feel about the many fears that come with being an educator and strongly sticking to my roots. I now teach at a private school and for the first semester I felt like I needed to prove myself more than I had ever needed to previously. Why do you ask? Well, I am the only Black girl on our team. I'm the only Black girl that works on our floor. I am one of two Black girls in the entire building. So, to attempt to describe how I feel in this photo is only just a glimpse into my day-to-day as a Black educator.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND TEACHING

My initial thoughts on the COVID-19 pandemic, the rising of police brutality, and school shootings were that the world was coming to an end in the next second, and we had no time left to get this thing called life right. I was sinking, fast, and felt I could no longer protect my family from what the

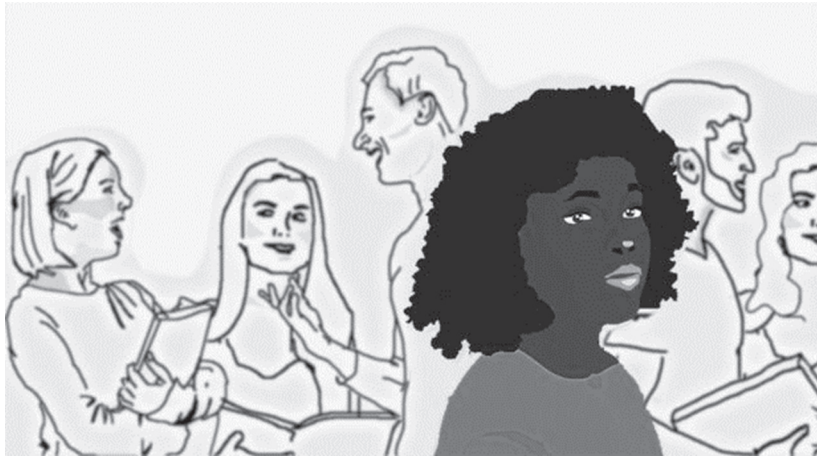

Figure 1.1 The only Black girl. From the token Black friend: You're not the ally you think you are, by T. Warburton, 2021, https://www.queensjournal.ca/the-token-black-friend/. Copyright 2021 by T. Warburton.

world had done. As this plague began to strike our nation, it became more difficult for me to believe that we were going to be ok. A week after spring break, those who had travelled and participated in social events began to receive emails and newsbreak announcements on an upper respiratory infection that spread faster than a common cold.

Teachers received emails that schools were closed for another week or two, and we came back to take precautions. Those emails quickly turned to resources on how to stay safe during a pandemic. Panic struck as the word 'quarantine' rose out of the shadows and we all braced ourselves for the worst. My birthday was a few weeks away and I wanted to celebrate big, as this was my 30th, and you approach this milestone of age only once. Well, like many other meetings, my birthday was celebrated through Zoom. I had never heard of this before the pandemic because my entire life was spent physically socializing with people.

In April 2020, we began planning how to teach pre-kindergarten students online. I laughed at the thought of a group of 15–25 4-year-olds participating in online learning. It was not ideal, but we made it happen the best we could. I think back on those moments and realized how many students needed to learn inside of a building with friends and teachers. The new online teaching was filled with distractions that sabotaged learning opportunities and focused on real-life problems to give children and their families real-life solutions.

Upon returning to the classrooms in the fall, every student and teacher was behind masks, fear, and the daunting thought of contracting a virus that was out of anyone's control. Materials could no longer be shared; hugs could no

longer be given; and students could no longer experience what it was like to have fun in class and be kids. Social-emotional learning was then placed at an even higher priority, where teachers had to relearn how to deliver responses to behaviours. As child suicide rocketed at an alarming rate, kids were being left behind to figure things out on their own, because the adults in their lives did not have the answers and could barely help themselves.

The U.S. Department of Education stated that data collected before and during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that

> … in-person learning, on the whole, leads to better academic outcomes, greater levels of student engagement, higher rates of attendance, and better social and emotional well-being, and ensures access to critical school services and extracurricular activities when compared to remote learning (U.S. Department of Education, n.d)

We knew remote learning would be a disaster, especially for our students who longed for the physical classroom. Our students needed more than support in engagement and perfect attendance awards when we came back to the classroom. They needed adults to be honest about this hardship, but willing to break away from fear and create a new approach to learning and self-care.

By the 2021–2022 school year, I felt like I had gotten a grasp on how to move around without allowing negativity to affect my life. My kids though—my kids were struggling, unhappy, nervous, and overwhelmed. My son had fallen behind and was using the phrases, 'I can't do this. Mommy, I hate school now'. He was always tired and never had any energy for anything else that he enjoyed. He started to become a different person and I despised COVID-19 and many other things that had been going on in the world. My daughter was never exposed to formal early education because of the pandemic. So, she started kindergarten, and it seemed as though her teacher forgot that none of her students had previously had the opportunity to attend preschool. I blamed my personal experience with people lacking the ability to observe the problem and tackle it instead of sweeping it under the rug.

I began working hard at finding solutions for my kids. One thing that struck me was my Black child saying he can't do this. I never wanted him to feel so disappointed in himself at the age of 7 when the only thing he should have been worried about was learning how to ride a bike without training wheels. I reached out to the school counsellor and the inclusion team. I stressed the fact that we would not allow the school to let our children fall behind and after many children experienced tragic losses, the school needed to move in a way that supported social and emotional well-being first. I suggested more time to decompress before morning work and more time to build relationships with their peers. Overall, I

advocated for creating an inviting environment that allows students to be productive in what they know and then gain the confidence to want to know more.

RACIAL JUSTICE IN TEXAS

Along with the fear of my kids losing confidence, something more unpredictable was happening in our country. The thought of my kids not being able to walk to the corner store when they are older to buy Takis and a Twix and make it back home without being killed by the very people that are supposed to protect them haunted me. I was reminded of the incident in 2012, when a 17-year-old Black boy named Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by former police officer George Zimmerman. This raised my awareness on gun violence regarding police officers. The death of George Floyd in 2020 struck a nerve that I've never experienced before, however. It struck conversations at home that many parents wanted to avoid. I felt the same. As I sat to try and find the words to describe to my kids what had happened, I simply said, 'police are supposed to be the good guys'. My son responded with, 'so who are we supposed to call now?'

I attended my first protest in Dallas. As beautiful as it looked, it was quite intimidating to see so many law enforcement officers lined up waiting for anyone to make the wrong move. The wrong move could have very well just been us walking down the street. Were they there to protect us or themselves? This moment made me look back to when I was 17, in an abusive relationship with someone who almost took my life. At the time, it felt like innocent people get treated the worst. My abuser went to jail for a moment, but it had nothing to do with mistreatment of women. Instead, he translated his impulsive and bullying ways into starting his own business as a tattoo artist with his own shop. George Floyd and many others did not deserve to die at the hands of someone else. Just like those innocent people, I could relate to them and how they are treated like an existing body that holds no morals to anyone or intent in this world.

I didn't know how to feel with all these things going on. When the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement started, I felt like we were right back where we started with having to be careful about going out and moving about the city. With COVID-19, the media said that masks will protect us. With the increase of murders by police officers, what did we have to protect ourselves? Let's actually reverse back to the BLM movement. When it was created, it had the right intentions. Everyone I knew was ready for a change and excited for people to hear our voices.

I sensed that the BLM Movement eventually changed and became another social media fab that would be taken over by people who have never

had to face any hardship being born Black. I asked two women (referred to as T. Starghill and C. Spears), both wives and moms who aspire to do more for their community, about how they felt about the BLM movement and where they stand today. T. Starghill stated that she felt that:

> The BLM movement started with the right intentions but has morphed into a tagline that Republicans use to mock our attempts to progress in this country. This issue falls on our own people who abuse the movement for their power-driven financial gains. I do not need the organized BLM movement. My life is a BLM movement of its own. (personal communication, 2023)

Starghill made several major points, but one that stood out to me was her stating that she didn't need the movement, that she was a movement on her own. This enlightening statement drives me to take pride in being the only Black educator on my teaching team. C. Spears, another close friend of mine, describes her relationship with the BLM movement. She stated:

> It makes me mad, sad, and disgusted all at the same time. It brought focus to the issues that have been happening way before social media and cell phones. It also brought attention to what we all knew was happening. Politicians have turned it into another racial group with an agenda other than what it was created for. Even our own people use it as clout chasing. It's a reminder for those who don't care or who choose that we are people too and our lives have meaning. (personal communication, 2023)

On 6 January 2021, an attack on the White House following the defeat of the former president, Donald Trump, sent a message that would heighten the response to many Republicans. After the riot, which allegedly caused harm to many, security for the White House was quickly revamped and ready to be protected. The interesting thing is, as an educator I feel that we lack this type of security when people attack schools. Why is it that the White House can double up on security, but schools only have officers during morning and afternoon carlines for routine traffic stops? The United States has had 13 school shootings, and we are only 3 months into the year. In my opinion, everything is backward, money-driven, abusive, and heartbreaking.

My children at home typically face problems that I did not endure until I was in high school and old enough to understand how to respond. This past year, they have been called out about their skin colour just about every other month of the school year. My daughter came home one day and said she was climbing up the jungle gym and a group of boys said, 'Black girl alert'. She proceeded to ask me what they meant by that comment, and I will be honest, I did not know how to answer her question in a way that a seven-year-old would understand. No one will ever prepare you for how to raise children in a society that teaches them to hate themselves and others.

LESSONS LEARNED

Donald Glover, also known as Childish Gambino said it best—'This is America, don't catch you slippin' now' (Glover, 2018). Remember those commercials that would show hungry children in different countries and paint this picture that living in America is your best bet! I think that the situation is daunting to know that we are no longer selling the 'American Dream'. I remember when I wanted the white picket fence, but now all I need to do is simply survive the increase of cost in rent, car loans, food, and gas. It's a stuck feeling of being out of control on how I live my life. It's intimidating. I don't want to say that I've changed, but I refuse to let America define me.

Sometimes, I feel like I will always be underneath a glass ceiling. Just waiting and watching lives unfold in front of me. It reminds me of a sunflower a few years ago, and while the seasons changed and Texas weather did what it does best, it taught me a few things. It started as a tiny seed and grew to be about 4 feet tall. Its stem was strong, it grew several tiny flowers, and was a showstopper when people drove by. I related so much to this sunflower because not only did it go through immaculate weather changes and survive, but the stem had broken, and I had to cut the sunflower to regrow.

Last year during recess, a colleague of mine had fostered a child around the age of 5 or 6. My colleague is White, the little girl is Black. I remember she used to express how difficult it was to raise her but how much she adores loving her. One day, she said, 'Bobbi, I should send her to you because you know… you can relate!' My response was, 'Yeah she would probably be better off with someone who doesn't dangle her in people's faces like a new puppy'. She had been so proud of adopting a little Black girl and assuming she was giving her a better life. Once again, the perfect example of abuse of power and too much money she lost and didn't understand how thinking that way eventually hurts her Black child. Educating kids is easier than educating racist adults, but the key is to stay humble and stand your ground.

I must admit, I am drained and over being a classroom teacher. It is situations like the one described above that make me want to explore educating adults about the importance of building children's self-esteem. It's not about the latest fashions or allowing them to choose their breakfast or lunch for the day. I must also understand that while attempting to create a path for my students and my kids, this path was not created for everyone to succeed.

I've learned that my career in early education is rewarding, yet extremely problematic, underappreciated, just the low blow of education. I say this because I have witnessed the benefits in early learning and making connections with families regarding their children is the highlight of my career. The dark side is that I hardly have a voice in how I protect my students, curriculum usage, parent communication, and not to mention, living paycheck to paycheck. I have met many parents who definitely

see early childhood education as a large group of babysitters. I have also been blessed with a group of parents and students who view early childhood education as the holy grail of education. I look at both groups as an opportunity to display the wealth and opportunities that arise from receiving early education.

I learned from my mom how to listen to my children when they want to talk. I did not have that opportunity as a child. Many of us know the whole 'stay in a child's place' comment. I think I would have been a better-behaved teenager had I known what was going on in my home and could have answered many questions I had but was not allowed to ask. Jeremiah and Jaedon may ask some of the most awkward and uncomfortable questions, but I will never tell them they aren't allowed to have an answer to that. We know that if we aren't honest with our children, they will go searching for the answers elsewhere and it may not be the safest place to look.

Like the sunflower, life has been rough, glorious, cutthroat, and heartfelt. I am learning to enjoy every moment, even if some moments seem to be dreadful. It's about taking those moments and making the best out of the tiny victories that arise beneath the surface. Growth, trial and error, failure, disappointment, and achievements. It's all a part of the life God granted us, it's what we do with these moments that really shape the person we want to become and who we are today.

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