



Bank Street

Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2020
Number 43 *Possibilities and Problems in
Trauma-Based and Social Emotional Learning
Programs*


Article 2

April 2020

Looking for Trouble and Causing Trauma

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Recommended Citation

Foster, M. D. (2020). Looking for Trouble and Causing Trauma. *Occasional Paper Series, 2020* (43). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2020/iss43/2>

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Looking for Trouble and Causing Trauma

Marquita D. Foster

When I became an elementary assistant principal in 2013, I was intrigued when the principal explained that she had assigned me to handle discipline for pre-K through second grade because of my calm demeanor. “The little ones do quirky things,” she said. “Quirky things” sounded innocuous. I would soon learn that “quirky things” was a mild euphemism for pathological behavior.

I wasn’t prepared for the occasionally cruel manner in which school policy expected me to handle quirki-ness, especially in four-year-olds. I didn’t agree with the labeling of these children because, as some label- ing theories maintained, it could result in children internalizing the teachers’ perceptions of them (Fergu- son, 2010).

Ironically, labeling children resulted from one of my major responsibilities as assistant principal—training teachers every August before school started on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports or PBIS, “which is the only approach to addressing behavior mentioned in [school] law” (National Education Associ- ation, 2014). PBIS is a three-tiered approach in which teachers utilize universal, targeted, and individualized strategies to prevent misbehavior in the classroom and common areas within the school (e.g., the hallways).

I struggled because I realized that the training cultivated my teachers’ deficit thinking about Black children. Deficit thinking is operationalized in the policies and practices of many school systems, to substantiate stereotypes, justify attitudes, and to exact zero tolerance for Black children and children of color learning and behaving outside of the norm (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

In addition to PBIS, I had to present my teachers with other options to address the behavior of some chil- dren. Besides the traditional discipline methods, there was Response to Intervention (RtI), another three- tiered approach that was problematic because it also pathologized children’s behavior by evaluating it as a disability. Finally, I considered social and emotional learning (SEL), but an examination of SEL revealed that it came with several challenges that our campus couldn’t undertake.

This article recounts and reflects on my most challenging year as an assistant principal in a Texas public school. I provide the community and school context, describe how quirkiness became pathologized, share my struggles to find solutions to address behavior, and conclude by making a case for “othermothering” as an effective approach to SEL. I believe othermothering would have been a benefit to our school because it retains Afrocentric family values, supports the well-being of all Black children, and sustains a collaborative relationship between the Black family unit and the school.

Community and School

In the five-mile drive between home and school Monday through Friday, I enjoyed a splendid Venn diagram of urban, suburban, and rural landscapes navigated by almost 38,000 people. My school lay in a neigh- borhood that had aspects of all three: it was one street over from a major highway that brought urban busyness. It was tucked behind moderately priced apartment complexes and houses. It was a block away from a goat farm that also had chickens and a horse. Since the early 1980s, the community had noticeably flipped from mostly White to predominantly Black. Hispanics became the second largest minority group when they began moving into the area in the early 2000s.

My campus offered grades Pre-Kindergarten Age 4 (Pre-K4) through fifth grade and had over 500 students. Ninety percent were Black and approximately 6 percent were Hispanic. The faculty was comprised of 30 Black teachers and one Hispanic teacher. Ninety percent of our children were economically disadvantaged, with 51 percent considered at risk of dropping out, based on state-defined criteria such as unsatisfactory performance on readiness or state assessments or placement in an alternative education program (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

To support academic readiness, district leadership placed heavy emphasis on growing the pre-kindergarten program. Boasting the highest rate of enrolment in Dallas County, the school district offered free, full-day pre-K4 on all seven elementary campuses for eligible four-year-olds and partnered with Head Start of Greater Dallas to provide nutritional and health-related services. The district also promoted a balanced literacy initiative alongside science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education for pre-K4 classrooms.

August Tears

Wailing, shrieking, full-on tug-of-war between mother and child, promises to return, bribes for good behavior, sincere-then-harsh demands to stop crying, parents inching away and sneaking out down the hall behind screams of terror. Our students punctually arrived in brand-new school uniforms unaware that their moms, dads, and grandmothers would shortly hand them over to absolute strangers.

My four pre-K teachers spoke calmly as they gathered up their children and ushered them toward wonderfully bright, print-rich classrooms. They looked like they were counting the children. Class sizes over 18 were taxing, even with the assistance of paraprofessionals. I usually brought up the rear, nervously smiling and grabbing little hands and directing tiny feet. Each year, they seemed to get smaller and more infantile, too fragile to navigate the incredibly scheduled, factory-paced public school setting. By ten o'clock, the crying and pleas to go home crested and troughed. Sobbing was contagious. Every kind word, every act of comfort, every test of patience was repeated like the celebrated plot of the movie *Groundhog Day*. Late August chaos, the beginning of "real" school for some four-year-olds.

Crying in October Means Something's Wrong

Mid-September was the first "behavior benchmark." We understood that the children's emotional outbursts over perceived abandonment were signs of stress. Crying was natural, even healthy. If, within a few weeks of school, most children stopped crying and could keep their hands to themselves and a bubble in their mouths, we credited the teachers' ability to help them adapt to the school's expectations of socially acceptable behavior. To develop students' self-control, teachers' efforts were buttressed by the implementation of "token economies," as recommended by Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). A token economy is a system of rewards that schools utilize to encourage and reinforce good behavior. For example, students receive a token such a ticket or chip for adhering to their teachers' expectations (e.g., being quiet in the hallway or cleaning up their desks). Students then exchange their tokens for rewards or privileges, such as treats or extra time at recess. Token economies are very popular with students, and research indicates that such positive behavior reinforcement techniques are effective in reducing inappropriate behaviors in elementary classrooms (Filcheck, McNeil, Greco, & Bernard, 2004). Within my first year, I discovered through teacher feedback that PBIS worked but lost effectiveness after the first six weeks of school. I now realize that the mid-September behavior benchmark signaled the downside of token economies. That is, the value of positive behavior supports tended to decrease as the shine of extrinsic rewards wore off.

However, if some children were still crying in October, there was concern. On our campus, October was usually when teachers' frustrations with repetitive behaviors began to show and office referrals increased. If their use of PBIS strategies couldn't improve behaviors, then the teachers sought my assistance. So in early October, teachers started sending me emails, dropping by my office, or stopping me in the hallway to express their concerns. True to deficit thinking, something was wrong with one or two of their children.

One veteran teacher, seemingly adept at evaluating behaviors on sight, caught me walking out of the building one afternoon and gave me her diagnoses. "Some of these kids aren't well. They just cry too much. Noise bothers them. How can there not be noise in a pre-K classroom? And I can't even touch some of them. I'm pretty sure that's because half of them are autistic. But then again, in this neighborhood, they could be drug babies."

My teachers appeared to say, without saying, that "the neighborhood" (coded language) played out significantly in their children's lives. This perception was evident after I called an after-school meeting with the pre-K faculty. The teachers talked about how much of their time and energy was occupied with addressing the disruptive behaviors of a few children. They had contacted parents several times and consistently provided rewards and consequences, but the increasing incidents of defiance, insubordination, profanity, sexual acting out, and garden variety misconduct left them unsure about what to do.

"I don't mean any disrespect because I love these children, but poverty is the problem here. Poverty is trauma. And poor people have behaviors that don't align with what we do at school. I know how that sounds but it's true," a fifth-year pre-K teacher said. Heads nodded and "yes" echoed throughout the room. The unanimous agreement with this teacher's comments bothered me but I wasn't surprised, even though this was Black teachers discussing Black children. This statement does not intend to express an indictment of Black teachers but allows me to offer a criticism of the school system in which Black teachers have to work.

After over 20 years in education as a Black educator, I realized that there was something specious about school systems and their expectations of us as Black teachers. On one hand, we are highly sought after because of the cultural understanding and advocacy that we bring to the classroom. The research on student-teacher racial matching or the role model effect has shown that Black children academically benefit from having at least one Black teacher during their educational careers (Dee, 2004, p. 58).

On the other hand, the school systems also expect teachers, regardless of race and ethnicity, to help children conform to Western, middle-class standards of achievement and civility because these are societal expectations (Kentli, 2009; Noguera, 2003). Over time, teachers (and administrators) develop organizational thinking and internalize the systemic biases reflected in schools' policies and practices, such as discipline policies (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). For Black teachers, this expectation can also lead to role entrapment (Madsen & Mabokela, 2000), where we find ourselves being seen as experts on how to "fix" Black children.

The expectation and adherence to school practices can cause Black teachers to form what W.E.B. DuBois (1903/2005) called a double consciousness:

this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body (p. 9).

So I understood the underpinnings in the pre-K teachers' attitudes and actions. As their discipline administrator, I shouldered the responsibility for executing punishments beyond their authority. Harsher, more punitive consequences sometimes worked to reduce or eliminate misbehavior, but suspending disruptive pre-K through second grade students was no longer allowed. Texas had just passed House Bill 674, which stated that "a student enrolled in a grade level below grade three is prohibited from being placed in out-of-school suspension" except in cases where weapons or drugs were involved (Texas 85th Legislature, 2017).

This law required districts to create positive behavior programs with disciplinary alternatives. We already had PBIS, so we needed to look for causes. Was poverty responsible? If not, then what?

Poverty as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)

According to the National Health Policy Forum (2004), 72 percent of children and youth will suffer one adverse childhood experience (ACE) before they are 18 years old. The most common ACE in America is poverty. Not all children who live in poverty experience it in the same manner, but enduring long-term poverty can translate into behavior issues in some children.

Data show that a staggering number of Black children endure poverty. The Children's Defense Fund (2018) states that while the child poverty rate for Blacks is declining, it is still significantly high. Blacks only represent 13 percent of the U.S. population, but about one in three Black children under 5 years of age is poor and nearly one in five Black children is extremely poor. Using census data from 1980-2010, Firebaugh and Acciai (2016) analyzed 57,370 metropolitan neighborhoods. Looking at Black neighborhood disadvantage, they found that Blacks, more than any other Americans, continue to live in poorer communities and neighborhoods.

Children living in poverty are clearly affected by their circumstances, but children can be resilient in the presence of a strong family unit. However, I found it difficult to change the teachers' deficit thinking about poverty, even when there were positive aspects such a strong family unit to consider. In our community, the extended Black family unit with blood relatives and "adopted" non-blood members showed support for the children's education. Grounded in African heritage, this extended network was devoted to the service of children, providing them guidance, and seeing to their well-being (Wolf, 1983).

Even though family involvement is encouraged in schools, research shows that some schools do not make Black parents feel welcomed or valued (Koonce & Harper, 2011). We often blame Black parents, particularly mothers, for their children's circumstances (Cooper, 2009). In our school, our deficit beliefs were covertly sent, in the coded language of PTA meetings and newsletters. For example, we provided "tips" for Black parents on how to help their children care about their education. Because of these kinds of school practices, my teachers focused on the evidence and expression of poverty in the neighborhood instead of on the assets within the family unit.

Hunger and Behavior

As we continued to meet and seek solutions, issues of hunger arose, which I did not dismiss. Based on my experience, hunger was one of the last things considered when assessing the cause of students' behavior. In 2018, Texans Care for Children released the report, "Keeping Kids in Class." Its findings, referenced in House Bill 674, focused on the causes of school suspensions. Among the reasons listed was unmet basic needs. The report stated, "Behaviors stemming from hunger, developmental disorders, trauma, and similar causes can be addressed effectively but cannot be 'disciplined away'" (Texans Care for Children, 2018, p. 7).

It is important to note that while many studies conclude that hungry children appear more likely to show behavioral and academic problems, these studies cannot prove that there is a causal relationship between hunger and behavioral problems. There may be another variable that correlates more than hunger, and hunger may be the effect and not the cause (Kleinman, et al., 1998).

Even so, the American educational system has made efforts to assuage the effects of hunger in school-aged children since the mid-twentieth century. The National School Lunch Act of 1946 ensured per-meal cash reimbursements to schools that provided healthy lunches to poor children (United States Department of Agriculture, 2013). The 1966 Child Nutrition Act, acknowledging the link between food, nutrition, and children's capacity to develop and learn, extended measures to special milk and breakfast programs (Social Security Administration, 2019).

Our district leadership ensured that our schools remained vital food sources, especially in the summertime. In addition to free and reduced-cost lunch, schools offered breakfast in the classroom and summer feeding programs, which addressed how food insecurity in childhood negatively impacted cognitive, behavioral, and socio-emotional development (Jyoti, Frongillo, & Jones, 2005).

Additionally, all our schools implemented the Food 4 Kids North Texas Food Bank program to tackle the issue of weekend hunger. Our counselors were charged with providing teachers with referral forms for students whom they witnessed exhibiting signs of hunger, such as asking for more food or hoarding food (Feeding America, 2019). Based on teacher observations, students were referred to the counselors, who ensured that they received a backpack of nutritious snacks every Friday after school.

These initiatives to fight hunger seem to disrupt the notion that hunger was the problem in pre-K. What my investigation of hunger on campus did prove was that we were remiss in treating hunger with the Food 4 Kids program. First, it was possible to misidentify students as food-insecure purely based on signs of hunger. Misidentification meant some students received extra food, whether or not they needed it.

Second, it was also likely that food-insecure students were overlooked because they did not exhibit hunger behaviors and were not getting into a lot of trouble. They would have had to stand out some other way, such as in their hygiene, personal appearance, or clothing. Still, these conditions could have been related to access to personal care products rather than signs of food insecurity.

Third, our counselor limited our teachers to six food referrals for the school year. This had not been my experience on other campuses where the number of food referrals was limitless. I do not know why there was a difference. But the limitations on referrals meant that our teachers had to select students who demonstrated the severest and/or most obvious signs of hunger, probably missing some students who needed the Food 4 Kids program.

I could not prove that hunger was contributing to misbehavior, and some pre-K teachers believed that just giving students more food would not have solved their problems anyway. Our discipline statistics still suggested that there was "something" going on with our four-year-olds. According to the school's behavior management database, our pre-K students, from October to January, had as many reported incidences of classroom disruptions as our third graders. They were "sent home" as often as students in grades 3-5 combined.

We were now seriously considering some of our students' mental health. My teachers did not feel as though they were equipped to handle mental health behaviors, so they requested training. The prevailing notion was that poverty caused trauma and trauma affected mental health. It was hard not to make such

connections because talk of poverty, trauma, and social-emotional learning was everywhere—on the news and internet and in academic literature.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

During a principals' meeting in the fall of 2017, a group of behavior specialists presented district data about the increase of behavior problems tied to confirmed mental health diagnoses. The specialists distributed a handout outlining the signs of social-emotional disorders that principals and teachers should be looking for in students. They also provided a packet of mental health resources for principals and counselors to share with parents in need of community-based services. They urged all campus leadership to discuss social and emotional learning (SEL) in future staff developments, and they proposed attending staff meetings to provide support. I took them up on their offer. I knew very little about social and emotional learning at the time.

In the last two decades, SEL has been deemed promising in developing children's healthy responses to stress because it teaches them to become self-aware, self-regulate their emotions, and make sound decisions (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). According to Zins and Elias (2006), SEL evolved from prevention and resilience research by the Consortium of the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence (1994). The publication of Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* in 1983 and Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* in 1998 helped spark interest in SEL in the late 1990s.

In the introduction to *Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman (2005) said he hoped SEL would become standard practice in every school; he noted that the many benefits of acquiring emotional intelligence (EI) had gone to privileged children in private schools. He stated that many children from marginalized neighborhoods also benefited if their schools implemented social and emotional learning practices.

Since the 1990s, education-related companies, working in concert with schools, have assumed the sense of urgency to provide social-emotional learning training and resources. For example, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), perhaps the most well-known organization contributing to this restorative movement, maintains on its website that its social and emotional interventions have increased academic achievement and improved behavior in pre-K through high school since 1997. CASEL (2019b) refers to "an extensive body of rigorous research" that authenticates the long-term impact of social and emotional learning on equity, poverty, and life outcomes (e.g., education and employment). Current research on adverse childhood experiences has strengthened the narrative about how SEL can positively impact children's learning and behavior.

Jumping on the SEL Bandwagon

In preparation for my staff meeting to discuss social and emotional learning (SEL), I explored twenty "reputable and secure" SEL organization websites. They promoted familiar strategies such as creating a safe learning environment, cultivating positive relationships, elevating cultural identity, and rejecting whitestreaming of the curriculum.

Many of the websites, such as that of the Wallace Foundation (2019), referenced CASEL and cited similar results and long-term outcomes: improved attitudes and behaviors, fewer negative behaviors, and reduced emotional distress. Some websites provided a link to a meta-analysis of 213 different studies of schools that implemented SEL programs and reported an 11-percentile point gain in the academic achievement of students participating in SEL (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

As I searched for information, I found the saturation of SEL information dizzying. A few critiques suggested SEL had been developed so quickly by so many different organizations that there needed to be ongoing evaluations of the claims of effectiveness and success, and that programs varied widely in what they offered and emphasized as social and emotional learning (Bear, Whitcomb, Elias, & Blank, 2015).

Being an SEL School Comes with a Price

Nonetheless, I pushed forward. The behavior specialists arrived and presented the same PowerPoint as they had at the principals' meeting. They provided teachers with behavior checklists and restorative strategies. Their presentation was helpful, my teachers said. Their resources were good, but my teachers wanted and needed more. "Like a program, I suppose," I suggested. Some of the teachers responded, "Yes!"

After I researched the costs to implement an SEL program, it was clear that we would have to rely on our behavior specialists whose expenses were already covered in the district's budget. The SEL programs were expensive. For instance, to implement Blueprints' Positive Action program with fidelity, schools would have to pay \$9,859 for the first year. Ongoing implementation and monitoring support would cost an additional \$3000 per day plus travel for on-site training, \$300 for an ongoing training workshop kit, and \$300 per hour for optional technical assistance (Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, 2019).

CASEL (2019a) provides a cost calculator because its programs are tailored to school district needs. In its financial sustainability toolkit, four models from different school districts are presented to help other districts estimate the costs of implementing and staffing CASEL's programs.

In the Austin Model, 14,234 students were served at a cost of \$49 per student, totaling \$697,466 for the first year. In the Chicago Model, which reflected different needs, 9,000 students were served at a cost of \$700 per student, totaling \$6,300,000 for the first year. The Washoe and Wheaton Warrenton Models were less costly, at \$217,134 and \$40,500, respectively.

In my opinion, there were two major potential problems with the direction SEL was heading. First, how would under-resourced school districts begin to pay for such expensive programs? I didn't doubt the positive testimonials of participating schools, but I agreed with the summary in *The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning*, which stated:

The benefits of an educational investment do not necessarily justify the costs. For some interventions, the benefits will exceed the costs. But in others the investment is not found to be compensated by its returns: even if an intervention is effective, it may be too expensive to implement. (Belfield, Bowen, Klapp, Lenin, Shand, & Zander, 2015, p. 3)

I knew that Title I funds could be used for such interventions and probably were, in most cases. Title I is a part of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) that provides funds to schools with high numbers of children from economically diverse families to help the children meet state academic standards. I had worked with three principals at three different schools who could have utilized Title I funds for SEL training, but they chose to use the funds to hire additional instructional support staff (e.g., interventionists) in order to improve reading and math scores on the state assessments. They relied instead on PBIS methods that cost little to no money at all.

Secondly, SEL ran the risk of being ruined by the efficiency model and reduced to a predetermined set of worksheets. For example, Austin Independent School District used School-Connect (2019) lessons based on CASEL's SEL competencies or abilities: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship

skills, and decision-making. Within each competency, there were at least three student learning objectives and over 20 individual lessons that were used, in some cases, in other competencies, depending on the student learning objective. There was practically a lesson for everything, from cultivating curiosity and grit to writing a college essay. When and how could my teachers use all these lessons?

Research addressing teachers' concerns about losing instructional time to implement SEL recommends integrating academic and SEL standards in the lesson cycle. Teachers are often expected to integrate curriculum initiatives, including digital technologies, with ineffective or infrequent follow-up support. Integration is complicated because state assessments are not going away and curriculum standards are not becoming less rigorous. School districts must address this contextual issue or run the risk of invalidating teachers' concerns about how to effectively use instructional time for SEL and meet the expectations of teaching the standards (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004).

Response to Intervention (Rtl)

We had considered poverty and hunger. Our schools could not afford to purchase a full year of SEL training and materials. Our PBIS program was faltering because disruptive behaviors and suspensions continued to rise. We had another option—Response to Intervention (Rtl), in which we would identify students' academic and/or behavioral needs, provide intensive interventions, and assess those interventions' effectiveness by routinely collecting data. Our Rtl implementation was already in full swing for our academic struggles. I now had to ask teachers to consider it for behavior. The request was not met with enthusiasm.

Pre-K teachers already felt overworked. The Rtl process would be adding another tremendous commitment. Our school had one interventionist whose time was spread thin providing academic support to at-risk K-2 students and third-to-fifth grade students taking state assessments in late spring. This situation meant that most teachers would be responsible for designing their own Rtl plans—in some cases, for more than one child.

Before any evaluations were scheduled with the diagnosticians, the teachers had to work their Rtl plans for six to nine weeks. Some of my pre-K teachers felt this process was pointless. Four-year-olds were deemed too young to be diagnosed with specific behavior disorders, but they did what they could with the Rtl process and focused their energies on instruction.

In the cases where other grade level teachers implemented the behavior Rtl through the entire nine-week cycle, I still felt that we were looking for trouble and calling it trauma. I felt the despair of mothers and fathers who sat in initial Rtl meetings and were told something was wrong with their children. I agonized over whether Rtl folders, full of documented behaviors related to broken school rules, would result in Black children being further violated in evaluations for emotional disturbance. I felt that we were causing trauma in parents, who expressed dismay and shame at failing their babies.

Crying As a Sign of Frustration, Not a Quirky Thing

Admittedly, I was convinced that crying in October was a sign of trouble, but in hindsight, I believe we saw tears of frustration. In this district, the pre-K curriculum was as rigorous as the kindergarten curriculum. I knew that one year made a difference in whether children could latch onto reading and math concepts in order to demonstrate comprehension and mastery on certain testing benchmarks.

The original intent of early childhood programs had been overtaken by draconian, heavy-handed initiatives to produce a generation of early readers. I was concerned that the “rush to reading” movement, initiated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and requiring children to become independent readers in pre-K and kindergarten, could do more harm than good if we did not take into consideration the children’s developmental levels. Young children being forced to read when they are not developmentally ready could cause frustration, anxiety, and stress. NCLB also impacted recess by emphasizing the importance of more time for academic achievement and less time for social-emotional development (Pellegrini & Bohn-Gettler, 2013).

In addition to implementing a rigorous curriculum, my pre-K teachers were required to test their children three times a year using a digital progress monitoring tool called Circle Assessment, which assessed such skills as syllabication, rhyming words, rapid letter naming, onset rime, alliteration, and shape discrimination. If children performed poorly on such assessments, they were given more interventions, including required time on the I-station program. We knew the students were enduring too much, but we did not consider the curriculum or the testing to be the problem.

In *The Politics of Reality*, Marilyn Frye (1983) used the analogy of the birdcage to illustrate oppression, and this metaphor could be used to describe the overbearing classroom environment in which my pre-K students found themselves on a daily basis. Their birdcage was lined with the demands of academic initiatives, behavior expectations, assessments, and benchmarks. It seemed that the “quirky things” were triggered by protocols and standards.

Cultural Empowerment and Othermothering

I failed miserably in my efforts to solve my pre-K teachers’ concerns with behavior. I now realize that I was overlooking othermothering as a cultural approach. Othermothering is a West African tradition in which other women assist blood-mothers with sharing mothering responsibilities (Collins, 2000). The literature regarding culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies was there to back it up. Too often, we fail to access students’ culture in meaningful ways in the classroom. We reject the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzales, 1992) that children bring from their culture, choosing to cherry-pick the parts of culture that we want to acknowledge such as foods, holidays, and important historical figures.

I wish I would have centered the vital functions of the Black family unit. Black children cannot be separated from their familial, cultural practices when they are being educated and cared for. It is an integral part of what forms their identities and girds them with survival mechanisms. The Black family unit has very rich support, especially due to the nurturing and empowering influence of othermothers.

In America, “mothering others’ children in slave communities was a necessity, as children were often orphaned by the sale or death of their mothers” (Guiffrida, 2005, p. 716). Thus, othermothers have historical significance, as providers of Black children’s social and emotional needs as well as defenders protecting Black children from the psychological harm of enslavement. After slavery and into the era of Jim Crow segregation, othermothers assumed the role of teachers in Black schools (Guiffrida, 2005).

Othermothering has the potential to empower not only Black children but Black teachers. It frees Black teachers from internalizing as well as participating in the curricular and disciplinary violence of school policies and practices. Othermothering raises their consciousness from surveilling and punishing Black bodies and minds to nurturing and guiding them. The potentiality is rooted in Afrocentric motherhood’s explicit capacity to uplift the Black social condition complicated by the structural racism and classism of the school system and society.

The teacher as othermother is more intuitive than the traditional teacher-student relationship that centers the schools' needs (e.g., high test scores). If schools want to be successful at improving Black children's academic achievement, they have to attend to their psychoeducational needs (Case, 1997). If schools continue to create policies that foster traditional relationships, the teachers may only see trouble and even trauma. They must make space for teachers as othermothers, emboldened strategists for change, and agents of empowerment.

Had we applied othermothering practices on our campus, I believe many incidents would have been handled differently. The role of my teachers would have changed from isolated classroom managers to a network of othermothers sharing in the care of all children. This shift alone would have affected how they viewed and addressed behavior, such as responding to crying with empathy and the compulsion to nurture. Without disregarding the existence of poverty, they would have viewed feeding all children as a part of caring for their bodies and minds. Without downplaying disruptive behaviors, they would have collaborated with families to find culturally meaningful consequences that supported both the values of the school and the home. Without disputing the importance of academic initiatives, they would have served as the voices for the children, advocating on their behalf to protect them from harmful school practices.

In the end, it was beyond unfortunate that our attempts to address our children's needs led us to look for trouble and to cause trauma. We genuinely wanted to use the potential good in SEL and the other approaches to create positive learning environments where children felt safe and cared for, where their cultural assets were recognized and utilized, and where their families were welcomed as a part of our school family. In this article, I hope to bring attention to the pathologizing and labeling of Black children that occurs so often in public schools, though possibly unintended by well-meaning adults, in order to illustrate how cultural practices such as othermothering can enhance Black children's well-being and academic achievement.

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About the Author



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