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Reimagining Early Childhood Classrooms as Sites of Love: Humanizing Black Boys through Head Rubs and “Playin’ the Dozens”

Nicole McGowan Madu

I gave birth to my first child during the COVID-19 pandemic. The months leading up to my August 2020 due date were extremely lonely. I was already riddled with fear as a Black woman giving birth in the United States, and the startling reality that Black women like me “are two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). During this time, I also found out that I was having a son; my thoughts raced as I mulled over his future before he was even born (Figure 1).



Figure 1. My son

Despite my fears of bringing a Black boy into this world during uncertain times, and as the cries that Black Lives Matter continued to ring loudly, I was empowered as I revisited my research and listened to the stories of two Black male teachers working to foster positive relationships with Black boys. This was important to me, as Black lives keep being rendered disposable (Hill, 2016) and Black communities have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

As the American Psychological Association president stated in May 2020: “We are living in a racist pandemic” (American Psychological Association, para. 1). The killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Elijah McClain, Daunte Wright, and the countless other unarmed Black men whose lives were prematurely

robbed at the hands of police authorities have the nation's undivided attention (Chokshi & Engel Bromwich, 2016). It is evident that race and gender continue to plague the course of Black male lives in the United States. America is failing Black men in countless ways—Black men are disproportionately underrepresented in positions of power and images of success; they are overrepresented in roles associated with failure, such as incarceration, unemployment, and early death (Noguera, 2013).

It was as a new mother of a Black son during the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racist attacks on Black lives that I was drawn to revisit the practices of two Black male early childhood teachers. In 2017, I had the opportunity to spend time with two talented teachers—Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson (pseudonyms)—as part of my dissertation study on the relationships between Black male early childhood teachers and Black boys.

Reflecting on my time with them in their classrooms of 6-, 7-, and 8-year-old children served as a powerful reminder that we can help change Black boys' lives. These teachers' actions and interactions with Black boys led me to reimagine Black boys' experiences in early schooling. Their classrooms countered the construction of Black boys as behavior problems, as dangerous, and threatening—all of which are common narratives threaded in the very fabric of what we know as the United States of America. Instead, their classrooms were sites of love.

BLACK CHILDREN AND SCHOOLING AMIDST COVID-19

As I speak with friends and family members, it is no surprise that Black parents have been reluctant to send their children back to school during COVID-19. While there are a number of reasons, two of the main reasons have been identified by Ladson-Billings (2020):

- Health and safety: “Black children are likely to live in multi-generational homes” and thus may asymptotically “contract and shed the virus and infect a grandparent or parent with underlying conditions. Given the high rate of COVID infections and death in the Black and Brown communities, Black families are not willing to take the risk of transmission” (para. 4).
- The violence that Black children experience in US schools: “Black families are keenly aware that school was not the haven of comfort and safety that some professionals try to pretend they are.... School is a place where adults yell at them” and “can be a place of a special kind of violence” (para. 5).

As Black children return to schools—or maybe I should say in order for Black children to return to school—it will be essential to abolish this “special kind of violence” (Ladson-Billings, 2020). We can no longer pretend that the violence is not there. While health and safety are being considered and are concerns that will be abated post-pandemic, the violence Black children experience at school needs attention.

In this article, I respond to questions raised by Ladson-Billings (2020): How have schools prioritized Black students' socioemotional needs? “How have Black students' teachers conveyed that to them?” (para. 6), offering a counter-story to the violence inflicted onto Black students. In thinking about what schools can look like for Black boys once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, I am reminded that Black boys, like all children, need love and affection, positive affirmations, and teachers who take the time to know them.

I hope that the counter-stories I collected prior to the pandemic can lead others to offer a glimpse of what is possible. I believe we have the potential to inform how we educators reimagine the future of education

for Black boys across the country. After all, as Milner (2007) reminded us, in his study on the education of African American males in the United States: “Black male students can and are succeeding in all types of schools—urban included—and the time has come for those of us in education to stop making excuses and to teach and empower Black males to reach their full capacity” (p. 240). This is especially relevant for Black boys, who are too often excluded from schooling from the earliest years. According to the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014), Black children are three times as likely as White children to be suspended from school.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to explore how Black boys learn in contexts that have historically oppressed the bodies, souls, and psyches of Black (male) students (Du Bois, 1903/1970), such as schooling, I employed critical race theory (CRT). CRT allowed me to ground new findings in what is already known about the impact of racism on daily, lived experiences. CRT centers and appreciates the value of storytelling, a long-established Afrocentric way of knowing, to counter majoritarian stories of Black men and Black boys as pathologies to be remedied (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It was from this perspective that I learned from two Black male teachers and one Black boy.

I also engaged Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 2000), which allowed me, as a Black woman, to acknowledge my positionality as insider/outsider. Black feminist thought allowed me to empower the voices of the Other. It offers a site to highlight traditionally invisible relationships and experiences. Finally, it uplifts the Black woman’s position in creating community within African American circles. Understanding that uplifting Black boys empowers them to believe in their personal success solidified my decision to apply Black feminist thought.

METHODOLOGY

My research questions guided the methodological approach undertaken in my study: How are the educational experiences of Black boys in early childhood classrooms in New York City shaped through interactions with Black male educators? Drawing on critical race theory and Black feminist thought, my goal was to illustrate *other people’s stories* given the rich tradition of storytelling within the African American community (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The study was conducted in a public charter school in New York City. There were three participants in the study: two Black male teachers and one Black boy, who was a student in one of the classrooms observed. In order to participate, participants had to self-identify as Black and male.

These counter-stories were constructed through a combination of the data gathered from two interviews conducted with each of the two Black male second-grade teachers (Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson) and a Black boy in second grade (Malik). The telling of their experiences teaching and learning together was coupled with 16 weeks of observations of their interactions. I served as the narrator of other people’s stories, which counter the dominant stories of Black boys and Black men. As Baszile explained (2015), “counterstorytelling is CRT’s *modus operandi*” (p. 239).

Through critical race theory, I sought to talk back via counter-stories, which “are, above all else, intended to interrogate and subvert the logic of multiple rationalities—legal, neoliberal, and scientific among others—and their role in reinforcing racism” (Baszile, 2015, p. 239), even if under the guise of

“good intentions.” By crafting critical race counter-stories, my aim was to fundamentally problematize longstanding struggles and power structures compromising the education of Black boys.

Observation notes were recorded on a three-column form. Themes were generated through the coding of both interview transcripts and observation notes. The interviews were coded first; in the interviews, empowerment, affection, making mistakes, and role modeling were mentioned by each teacher several times. These codes were then used to analyze the observation data, to provide explicit classroom examples of these themes in action. Below, I offer lessons learned that can guide us toward a future where early childhood education can affirm Black boys and suspend the harm and violence too often inflicted in and by schooling.

LESSONS LEARNED: ON THE NEED FOR AFFECTION AND SAFE SPACES

Early childhood classrooms are often deemed to be sites of warmth and affection, but these feelings are often not experienced by Black children. Black children are often subjected to rejection, treated as adults, and constructed as threatening (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Souto-Manning et al., 2021). This is illustrated by extremely high rates of suspension for Black boys in preschools (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014); Black preschoolers comprise 18% of all preschoolers in the US, but almost half of out-of-school suspensions.

In both of the observed classrooms (Mr. Gomis’s and Mr. Richardson’s), the teachers expressed affection and warmth towards their students, and more specifically, Black boys, in a variety of ways. In many instances, head rubs and pats on the shoulder were observed, coupled with smiles, high fives, and shared laughter. Throughout this study, both teachers discussed how they showed love and affection towards young Black boys, and the importance of these types of actions in early childhood classrooms.

The following counter-stories focus on how two Black male teachers reimagined teacher-student relationships between themselves and Black boys. Also included is the voice of Malik, a Black boy who was in second grade in one of the Black male teacher’s classrooms. Central to both teachers’ pedagogies was the ability for children to make mistakes in their classrooms as they learned and developed. Black boys were not penalized for mistakes but were often given second and third chances, creating a space where the Black boys felt loved and respected.

The counter-stories were purposefully constructed to surface how Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson cultivated and sustained sites of love in their classrooms. They were braided through a combination of observations, interview notes from the teachers and the student, and an analysis of a student artifact. In hopes that readers will consider them in the moment, these counter-stories are told in the present tense.

HEAD RUBS AND “PLAYIN’ THE DOZENS”

Black boys often experience public shaming, which inflicts violence (Ladson-Billings, 2020). In contrast, physical closeness and playfulness—both of which have been largely missing amidst the COVID-19 pandemic—offer a site for reimagining the education of Black boys. These serve as counter-stories to the dominant story of Black boys detailed by hooks (2004): “We force our children out of the wholeness and connectedness in which they begin their lives. Instead of cultivating intimacy” we teach Black boys “to bury their deepest selves, to stop speaking, or attending to...the state of closeness we all, by our natures, most crave” (pp. 121-122).

Here are some insights from Mr. Gomis' interactions with Black boys, a site for noticing and noting the need for humanizing Black boys. The indented paragraphs are my counter-stories.

Head Rubs

The students are wrapping up a whole-group lesson on the carpet with the co-teacher, Mrs. Tisdale, and are transitioning back to their seats to work individually or with a partner for guided reading. As the students transition, Mr. Gomis is privately checking in with the boys in the class. As the boys move to their spaces, he quietly pulls them to the side. I struggle to hear what Mr. Gomis is saying to the boys because the conversations are intentionally private. Having noticed that some of the boys struggled on the carpet during whole group, Mr. Gomis is making it clear to observers that the boys are allowed to make mistakes, to struggle with sitting still (as most young children do), and that a redirection does not have to include public shaming.

Mr. Gomis offers reminders of the expectations sprinkled with phrases such as, "remember to try your best" and "I know you can do it." Mr. Gomis also expresses a sense of closeness with his boys, with pats on the head as encouragement, an arm around a boy's shoulder as he listens to the boy explaining his needs, and standing in a cradling position over boys as they read.

These interactions seem to change the power dynamics between teacher and students because although Mr. Gomis is standing over the boys, his leaning in suggests that he is having a conversation with the boys, as opposed to merely telling them what to do.

Mr. Gomis reminds a Black boy that he is a leader and that other students look up to him, as he high fives with a different Black boy who has been focusing diligently on his independent reading. The boys are seen within this classroom and they appreciate and reciprocate the affection.

In addition to physical closeness, Mr. Gomis showed affection by telling jokes, similar to what is often referred to within African American communities as "playin the dozens." Smitherman (1997) notes its similarities to the joke-telling of West African ethnic groups such as the Efik in Nigeria. Smitherman says that this linguistic-cultural practice has critical rules: "For one thing, the insult must be funny and original ... and, most important, it must not be literally true because, then, it is no longer a game" (p. 13). The tradition is rooted in "the surviving African tradition 'Nommo' and the power of word in human life" (Smitherman, 1997, p. 4). In participating in "playin the dozens," Mr. Gomis was preserving an oral language tradition, connecting and building relationships between teacher and students across the African diaspora.

"Playin' the Dozens"

At one point during guided reading, a Black boy seems to have allergies, which cause a string of sneezes. Mr. Gomis, who is now working with a small group, looks up at the boy from his table. He smiles at the boy as he jokes, "If you continue to sneeze like that, I am going to get sick and then I'll have to go home." The boy quickly and wittily responds, "No, you will still have to be here!" Mr. Gomis and the boy share a laugh at the teacher's threat to not come to school.

During my interview with Malik, he explains that Mr. Gomis is strict, but that he can be less serious at moments too. Describing the picture he drew of Mr. Gomis as an interview prompt (Figure 2), Malik states,

Mr. Gomis is a nice person, sometimes he likes to tell jokes. He's strict and clearly likes order. He tells jokes but they're not silly jokes, they are jokes about how he wants you to behave. He's nice and he's kind. He's caring and respectful. When students are absent, he looks for the children. This is a picture of him smiling as he is teaching. He expects a lot from me. I can sometimes have an attitude but he still respects me.



Figure 2. Malik's portrait of Mr. Gomis

Friendly banter between teacher and Black boys was also common in Mr. Richardson's classroom. During an observation of a read-aloud, I was able to witness the candid humor between Mr. Richardson and his Black boys.

Mr. Richardson is reading a book about Wilma Rudolph and Mr. Richardson begins a discussion on an era in American history when "people of Color were not treated equally." At one point in the story, the author explains how Wilma fought back against her bullies, who taunted her about her physical differences. In a very lively manner, Mr. Richardson begins in a sermon-like fashion: "Do you think Wilma is just going to lay down and give up?" To which the students eagerly respond, "No!" Mr. Richardson turns his attention to the Black boy who is seated near him with his hand raised throughout this energetic call-and-response interaction: "Yes, Reggie. You have a question?"

With a grin on his face, Reggie sheepishly remarks, "Mr. Richardson, I thought this book was about her running a marathon." Mr. Richardson chuckles at the student's redirection back to the text, saying, "We're almost there." The statement was not perceived as a sign of disrespect as the teacher has created a classroom culture where joking is both a form of communication and a tool for building relationships with his students.

Situated in the hallway outside of Mr. Gomis's classroom, once again talking with Malik, I inquire about things Malik enjoys doing with Mr. Gomis, which leads us on a journey of discussing math games. "I like playing math games with Mr. Gomis. They're fun and I'm actually pretty good at math now." Malik goes on to talk about some of the math he has learned from Mr. Gomis, including the use of a T-chart to organize place values.

Malik also expresses his love for counting change and we spend a few minutes counting the coins that he heard clanging in my pocket. It is clear that Malik is engaged by learning experiences framed as games, and this is something that I observed in previous visits to Mr. Gomis's classroom: he often played games with his students, whether for learning purposes or to boost the overall morale of the students and foster relationships.

I ask Malik to share any other games he enjoys playing with Mr. Gomis, and he begins laughing before he starts the description. Malik continues:

OK, there's this game we play in class, right? It's a jumping-jack game. Mr. Gomis, he likes to stay in shape, so he's always got us doing some exercise. Well, my friend Justin really hates jumping-jacks, and Mr. Gomis knows this. Anytime he wants us to take a break, stretch a little bit, he tells us we're about to do some "Justins."

At this point, Malik is laughing uncontrollably at this joke.

See, what makes this funny is that now the jumping-jacks are called Justins and the whole class shares this joke. Even Justin, he doesn't get mad about it, he laughs, too. Because Mr. Gomis can just be funny! He says it with a serious face, "OK class, let's stand up and do some Justins," and everybody just starts laughing! Mr. Gomis doesn't laugh, but we all know it's his way of sharing a little inside joke.

Malik and I laugh at his imitation of Mr. Gomis's strict face as he makes a joke in front of the class. It is clear that Malik appreciates his teacher's sense of humor and he feels closer to him because of their shared history of inside jokes. This aligns with Mr. Gomis's intentionality in building relationships through jokes and wanting his students to have fun in his classroom. This interaction, which started by thinking about the fundamental math skills Malik had acquired in Mr. Gomis's classroom, showcases how Mr. Gomis holds Black boys to high learning expectations, but in a way that expresses affection through jokes and laughter.

DISCUSSION

Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson understood the importance of creating spaces where Black boys could vent, joke, and laugh as a way of combating some of the societal pressures that Black boys experience on a daily basis. This is particularly important for preserving positive early childhood experiences for Black boys, a period when play is critical to the learning process.

Additionally, while both Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson displayed affectionate gestures towards Black boys, they also communicated their care by holding their students to high expectations. Both teachers are *warm demanders*, which Delpit (2012) describes as those teachers "who expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them to reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment" (p. 77). These counter-stories highlight classrooms where Black boys are

shown affection, are held to high standards, and are allowed to make mistakes, creating positive learning experiences that stand in juxtaposition to common crisis narratives often portrayed in educational research focused on young Black boys.

The counter-stories offer us glimpses of early childhood classroom environments where love and justice are braided in the actions and interactions between Black male teachers and Black boys (hooks, 2000; Johnson et al., 2019). As such, they counter pervasive narratives of Black boys as threatening and needing to be removed from classrooms, which justify what Ladson-Billings (2020) termed a “special kind of violence.” Importantly, they offer us a compass to suspend the kind of violence Black boys have experienced in schooling prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The narrative of Black boys being overpoliced in classroom spaces, and implicit biases against Black boys starting in preschool, stand in contrast to the counter-stories provided, which emphasize how Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson created loving and welcoming spaces for their Black boys, understanding that young children require affection in order to build healthy interpersonal relationships and strong feelings of self-efficacy.

As teachers of young Black boys, these lessons on shared love and affection modeled by Black men have the potential to impact how they perceive relationships with other Black men outside of the classroom—learning that Black men express affection in ways that are culturally bound to the intersection of being Black and being male.

Additionally, both teachers created space for their young Black boys to make mistakes within their classrooms without being unnecessarily penalized. Too often, the media portrays Black boys as Black men (Ladson-Billings, 2011), stripping Black boys of their childhood before they finish elementary school. This portrayal of Black boys perpetuates a school system where Black boys are punished at higher rates because they are not given the freedom allotted to White children of making mistakes and trying again.

In both classrooms, there were times when Black boys failed to meet the teachers’ expectations by either answering a question incorrectly, behaving in a way that did not meet the classroom standards, or getting off task during a learning activity. However, these students remained in the classroom under the guidance of their Black male teachers, which stood in stark contrast to the narrative of pushing Black boys out of the classroom. Both teachers were intentional in their commitment to dealing with any challenges in their classroom, noting that early elementary-school Black boys need to be able to make mistakes and to recognize that there are adults who are there to support them when they need a little extra love and care.

The counter-stories that were produced as a result of this study challenge the majoritarian story of Black boys’ hypervisibility in special education and absence in gifted education programs (Milner, 2007). Malik helped bring to life the perspective of Black boys in early childhood education through his appreciation for his Black male teacher’s commitment to and expressions of care, shared cultural background, unique communication style (jokes as a form of affection), and no-nonsense approach when Malik had a self-proclaimed “attitude.”

Malik’s educational experiences fostered social-emotional well-being, largely missing for Black children in US schools (Ladson-Billings, 2020). Mr. Gomis was helping him recognize his potential as both a student and a Black boy who will become a Black man. Malik mentioned feeling respected by his teacher, which in turn made him feel like a valued member of the classroom community. His teacher had taken the time to know him on an individual level and verbally (and unabashedly) communicated “I love you.”

Black boys, like most young children, appreciate respect, care, and loving gestures, yet these attributes are often missing in teacher-student interactions between teachers and Black boys in early childhood education (hooks, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2011). Young Black boys need teachers who are not afraid of closeness, both in the physical sense (sharing hugs and high fives) and in relation to taking the time to really get to know them as individuals.

IMPLICATIONS

If we think of the COVID-19 pandemic as a portal (Roy, 2020), we have the responsibility to leave behind unjust systems that inflict violence on Black boys. We must instead commit to love Black boys, as love is a requisite to teaching young Black boys in the pursuit of justice. After all, as hooks reminds us: “There can be no love without justice” (hooks, 2000, p. 19).

Black boys need teachers who engage in love as action—via their commitment to supporting their growth, respect, and affection (hooks, 2000). Indeed, “it is our responsibility to give children love. When we love children we acknowledge by our every action ... that they have rights—that we respect and uphold their rights” (p. 30). When we arrive on the other side of this pandemic, embracing this responsibility will be ever more important.

To accept our responsibility, we must understand that love is not simply a feeling. While affection is certainly an ingredient of love, love also requires care, “recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication.” This requires early childhood educators to invest their feelings in Black boys and challenge the “assumption that we love instinctually” (hooks, 2000, p. 5).

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to slow down, to value each day, and to cherish our relationships. As we return to schools, we must commit to suspending the special kind of violence Black children endure in schools. We must ground the future of education in really knowing the children in our classrooms. And we must accept our responsibility—and associated work—for reimagining early childhood classrooms as a site where love can be intentionally and actively chosen, each and every day. Our Black boys deserve no less.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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