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## Black Mother Scholars Matter: Navigating Anti-Black Educational Spaces for our Black Boys

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**Black Mother Scholars Matter:  
Navigating Anti-Black  
Educational Spaces for our Black Boys**

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This article draws from Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit; anti-blackness; Dumas & ross, 2016) to explain how two mother scholars advocated for their Black sons in an antiblack education system. Currently the teacher workforce is 80% White and predominately female (NCES, 2022). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022), there are 7.4 million Black students in the US, representing 15% of the student population. Therefore, there continues to be a racial gap between teachers and children of color (Brooks-Easton, 2019). BlackCrit is a critical theorization of blackness and the Black condition (Dumas & ross, 2016). Additionally, BlackCrit uses framings rather than tenets to theorize these conditions of blackness. This article focuses on anti-blackness to describe the social suffering and resistance through ideologies and educational practices (Dumas & ross, 2016) our children experienced at the hands of White teachers and teaching staff in private and public schools. As hooks (1994) states, "I came to theory because I was hurting- the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living" (p. 59). We chose BlackCrit to frame our traumatic experiences and find healing through our activism for our Black sons. By telling our experiences as Black mother scholars, we challenge the racism and whiteness perpetuated in schools.

The following sections will highlight how our school experiences with our Black children have defined who we are as

mothers and scholars. The first story will detail a young Black boy's experience with racism and teacher bias in early childhood education. The second story addresses the inequitable and racist education experiences of a Black boy with autism.

**Can't Stop, Won't Stop Fighting**

As a parent, I wanted the best education and opportunities for my children. However, I did not realize that education and opportunities would come with a price for my children. For example, at the age of two, my youngest son's White preschool teacher reported that my son was exhibiting challenging behaviors (e.g., screaming and standing on chairs during lunchtime, hitting teachers when upset). These reports occurred almost daily for over a month. As a result, I began to develop anxiety whenever I would receive an email or see the school's number flash across my Caller ID. I became anxious because I knew what would be on the other end of the call or in the daily report.

At the early age of two, my son communicated well. When asked about his behaviors, he would respond by naming the other students who participated in similar behaviors. His response made it clear that he did not understand why his behaviors were an issue. However, as an early childhood educator, I transitioned into teacher mode and began developing resources and supports to help my child better navigate his classroom experience. When offered, I attended parent engagement activities. During one of my visits to the school during lunchtime, I witnessed several children standing on chairs and screaming as if this was a routine. These children, of course, were White. While giggling and serving lunch, the teachers stated, "Please sit down." Some students complied and others did not; however, the teachers gave no further

redirection. Eventually, all the children sat and ate their lunches. It was difficult to ignore the subtle redirection those children received for the “disruptive behaviors” that I often received phone calls and reports about regarding my Black son. At that moment, I realized that I was living the research reporting that Black children, specifically Black boys, are more closely observed when teachers expected them to engage in more challenging behaviors than their White peers (Gilliam et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, even after several meetings with the teacher, these reports continued until there was a change in teaching assignments. Finally, midway through the year, the school hired a Latinx teacher to take over the classroom. Then miraculously, the behavioral reports ceased. All the challenging behaviors my son was allegedly “exhibiting” were no longer seen or heard as if they had just vanished into thin air. Research shows that teachers of color are effective in improving academic achievement and teacher-student relationships when working with Black and brown children (Cheruvu et al., 2015). The new Latinx teacher worked hard to build a positive relationship with my son, and he continued to thrive until the end of the school year.

Two years later, my husband and I enrolled my now four-year-old in a prominent private school. He was one of two Black children in his class. After the first six weeks, I began receiving emails alluding to him being academically inferior to the school’s standards and his same-age peers. This was alarming to my husband and me because standardized assessments consistently ranked him above his age and developmental level. However, after further discussions with his two White teachers, it was obvious that he was being held to lower standards and was not required to complete work like his peers. Instead, he was given

the option to do less academically. Boykin and Noguera (2011) reported that educators normalize and accept low performance from Black and brown children. Also, Black children are often viewed as inferior to their White peers (Wright & Counsell, 2018), and I was living this in my life with my child.

We continued to receive emails from teachers indicating that my son had processing difficulties in grasping the curriculum. Additionally, I noticed his in-class work was being sent home with written messages (e.g., “Practice letters at home!!!”) to my husband and me. These messages often insinuated a lack of parent engagement, disregard for academics in the home, and a lack of assistance with homework completion. These assumptions were frustrating because we worked with our son daily on his homework and ensured my son always submitted work on time. Research indicates teachers often have a misconception that Black families do not value education and are not engaged in schools (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016). However, Black families are engaged in their child’s education and have aspirations for their educational achievement (Matute-Chavarria, 2021). I realized that my family was being stereotyped and that I had to advocate for my Black son and demand educational opportunity.

As a parent who holds a high value for education, this experience was frustrating and began to bring back traumatic memories experienced at his previous preschool. I was defensive and, more than ever, wanted to prove that my child was more than capable of meeting and exceeding the expectations of this program. After another meeting, my husband and I realized that both White teachers were not holding my son to the exact academic expectations as his White peers. Additionally, the school informed us that my son’s lack of progress might hinder his

opportunity to proceed in the kindergarten program. After eight weeks, the teachers expected my son to identify all letters and sounds and write on the lines of paper using D'Nealian letter formation. The academic skills required to progress were expected by the end of the school year. However, the teachers started collecting data on these skills to track and push him out of a prestigious private school. After the meeting, the lead teacher referenced my association with the local university and asked if I was going to school to be a teacher. She assumed that I had no knowledge of the field of education. As a mother scholar, I have social and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) and felt the teachers dismissed my concerns and input. When I explained that I worked at the university and taught preservice teachers and graduate-level teachers in early childhood and early childhood special education, I noticed a sheer shock demeanor on the teachers' faces. At that moment, both teachers began to articulate their concerns more clearly and were more open to hearing my concerns regarding my child's educational opportunities. My advocacy for my son was successful because of my experience as an educator. However, this interaction was frustrating because it gave me a glimpse of how White teachers perceive Black parents. Black parents and their children continuously experience inequities within the schooling system, and our voices are often silenced. This motivates my activism and scholarship in hopes to change the experiences of other Black parents that may not be aware of their rights.

### **Racism in Special Education**

As a single mother and previous special educator, I want the best for my son. At the age of five, my son was diagnosed

with the medical diagnosis of autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity (ADHD). He received special education services under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) through the school district under the category of developmentally delayed (DD). Shortly after, he was reevaluated and made eligible for services under the category of emotional disturbance (ED). Research indicates Black children are overrepresented in special education and oftentimes in the subjective categories (i.e., learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and emotional disturbance; US Department of Education, 2020). I did not want my son to be misidentified and another statistic due to teacher bias and racism. My son's teachers were all White and female. I am a strong advocate for my son and have the social and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) to advocate for my son's rights in the schooling system. I was upset and did not agree with the school psychologist and individual education program (IEP) team's evaluation. I had to file due process, request an independent education evaluation (IEE), and hire a special education lawyer to represent us. My son struggled in the special education class. I was called 257 times during the first three months of school due to daily behaviors (i.e., throwing paper, throwing toys, and running out the classroom) in the classroom. He was restrained 57 times by the special education teacher and teacher assistant for behaviors that could have been handled differently. My son was also suspended eight times. Per IDEA (2004), children who receive special education services cannot be suspended more than 10 times. His first year of school was a nightmare.

The results from the IEE recommended he be made eligible under the category of autism. However, the school still did not make him eligible under autism and identified him as having ADHD and

classified him under the category of other health impairment (OHI). I requested to move my son to a new school due to the hostile class environment. My son was then moved to a new school and placed in a classroom for students with autism. My son started to thrive academically and behaviorally at his new school. The teacher recommended my son receive all services in the general education classroom.

My son moved to a new school at the start of third grade due to new zoning requirements. He started to engage in challenging behaviors, and I was called daily. My son was restrained by school personnel 52 times and suspended 22 times. My son would come home and tell me he did not feel safe. On one occasion, the principal asked me to meet to discuss actions that would take place when my son turned 10. They had two local police officers in the conference room when I arrived. The police officers told me he would go to the juvenile hall if they continued to press criminal charges on him for hitting the teachers when they tried to intervene and restrain him. I explained that he was only turning nine years old in two weeks. They looked at me stunned and shocked, realizing their efforts to criminalize my son was delayed. He was then moved back to his old school, and they recommended a reevaluation for his IEP. They conducted the evaluation and made him eligible under ED. I was angered again, and it brought me back to our experience in kindergarten. I did not agree to the new eligibility, filed due process, and hired a special education lawyer. I requested an IEE, and he was then placed on a waitlist for the evaluation. As a mother, I was traumatized, exhausted, and racial battle fatigue was real.

My son then started fourth grade, and he was thriving and placed once again in the general education classroom. Shortly after, my son and I moved to another state in

the Southwest, but due to Covid, he continued with remote learning experiences. The new school district evaluated him with personnel from the headquarters (i.e., Special education coordinators and directors) because of the documentation written by the previous school district. My son was thriving at the new school and excelling academically, and did not have any behavioral problems. The evaluation was completed, and the school psychologist and team found him eligible for the autism diagnosis. They indicated that they agreed with the evaluation conducted by the clinical psychologist. This was the first time I felt my son received equitable services and unbiased evaluations. As a mother, I am happy that I continued to advocate for my son and his rights. Often, Black boys are misidentified and overrepresented in special education (Wright & Counsell, 2018).

### **Our Activism**

Through our experiences we have learned how teacher preparation programs fail Black children by continuing to perpetuate anti-blackness in the ways they prepare preservice teachers. Due to the current teacher workforce being predominately White (NCES, 2022), teachers need to reframe their teaching practices and how they impact Black children and their families. As scholars, our research and scholarship are for, with, and by Black people. Specifically, we focus on the intersections of race, disability, family, and identity to dismantle anti-blackness in school environments. We recommend that teachers must understand and acknowledge the cultural assets Black children and their families possess and bring into schools (Durden & Curenton, 2017). For example, Black children possess many cultural assets (i.e., vernacular, expressive individualism, oral tradition; Durden & Curenton, 2017).

Teachers also need to incorporate the cultural assets of Black children into the curriculum and how they interact with them on a daily basis to build meaningful relationships. In addition, teachers and school personnel need to understand how Black families engage in their child's education and work to build trusting partnerships with Black families.

### Conclusion

As Black mother scholars, racial battle fatigue is real. Too often, our Black children are devalued (Dumas & ross, 2016), deemed inferior (Wright & Counsell, 2018), overrepresented in special education (US Department of Education, 2020), and criminalized (Wright & Counsell, 2018) simply for being Black. Additionally, Euro-centric education systems often attempt to silence and disregard social and cultural capital from families of Black and brown children. These few experiences highlighted the importance of advocating for our Black children in the spaces that often devalue and degrade them, including educational spaces. As mothers and scholars in the field, it is our responsibility to advocate for our children and all Black children's right to have a high-quality education. Based on our experiences, we must continue advocating and resisting the racism, anti-blackness, and biases perpetuated in schools to ensure our children receive the education they deserve. Our voices and concerns matter and should be valued.

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