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A PSA I'm here too: Exploring the Harmful Experiences of Black Students through Critical Narratives

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Abstract

The paper illustrates the digital narratives of 219 Black students within the K-12 educational setting of a large West coast state in the United States. The researchers employed the method of storytelling to analyze Instagram posts created by students, which aimed to shed light on the various forms of injustice experienced by Black students. These online contributions effectively revitalized the significance of Black students' narratives and encounters with racism. The authors posit that educational institutions should reconsider their approach to mitigating the negative consequences encountered by Black students within educational environments. The present study serves as a call to action for educators and stakeholders to confront systemic anti-Blackness and create inclusive educational environments that prioritize the well-being and success of all students. Through collective effort and a commitment to antiracist practices, we can work towards a more equitable and just educational system. Addressing objectification and Whiteness requires a comprehensive approach that surpasses individual actions. Educators must acknowledge the ramifications of racially insensitive behavior and its impact on Black students in K-12 environments.

Introduction

In considering the challenges confronting Black children within the realm of education, one cannot overlook the persistent barriers obstructing their path to academic advancement. This paper embarks on an exploration of the prevalent issues surrounding harmful language, marginalization, and acts of anti-Blackness perpetuated by both educators and peers within a specific school district on the West coast of the United States. Central to our inquiry is the examination of how students grapple with racial trauma within the educational environment, shedding light on the ways in which educational institutions contribute to and perpetuate such trauma. Additionally, we scrutinize the emergence of a social media platform as a catalyst for youth activism in response to these entrenched challenges.

Drawing from the insights of scholars like Ladson-Billings and Tate, we situate our investigation within the framework of critical race theory (CRT), which underscores the enduring significance of race in shaping educational disparities. Through a qualitative lens, we prioritize the narratives and experiences of the participants featured in this study, leveraging data collected from interviews, social media posts, and documents to inform our

analysis. Using these data sources, we sought answers the following research question:

- How does Anti-Blackness manifest, confront, and propagate within K-12 educational settings in a specific school district on the West coast of the United States?

Our study aims to uncover two salient themes that underscore the complexities of the issues at hand. By synthesizing findings from the background literature, we offer recommendations for educational practices that not only address the immediate concerns highlighted but also contribute to the broader discourse on fostering equity and inclusion within educational settings.

Background Literature

Critical Race Theory and Education

In the United States' educational system, the study of history consistently emphasizes the painful events endured by Black individuals. In 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate sought to conceptualize race by employing CRT principles as its foundation and as its analytical tool for comprehending educational and societal disparities. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) established their work on three propositions asserting that race remains a crucial determinant of inequalities in the United States, the United States is fundamentally built on property rights, and the combination of race and property serves as an analytical framework for comprehending social disparities and inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). They asserted that the concept of race has not been thoroughly theorized.

When researchers have addressed race, they contend that it was not thoroughly analyzed as an effective method for understanding socioeconomic disparities. Ladson-Billings and Tate argued that earlier studies on race did not consistently incorporate it as a factor in the examination of educational disparity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Woodson (2017) and Du Bois (1994) presented compelling arguments emphasizing the pivotal role of race in comprehending educational disparities, particularly the phenomenon of double consciousness experienced by many African Americans in the United States. Ladson-Billings and Tate contended that race and colorblindness are significant factors in relation to schooling in the United States. Ladson-Billings and Tate argued that schools catering to economically underserved kids of color are unlikely to possess adequate resources, resulting in limited or no learning opportunities for the students, despite efforts to enforce educational standards (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In essence, this facet of CRT reveals that the disparity in educational opportunities is determined by the geographical location and social standing within that area.

Racism in Educational Settings

Ladson-Billings and Tate's primary contention was that CRT should offer a fresh outlook on racism within educational institutions, prompting a reevaluation of the existing paradigms of traditional educational studies. Ladson-Billings and Tate challenged the notion that multicultural education, when viewed as a type of reform, is insufficient. They argued that it assumes an assimilationist perspective, which aims to reduce prejudice and discrimination rather than eliminate them (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 62).

This phenomenon has been particularly exemplified in influential texts like "A Nation at Risk" published during Ronald Reagan's presidency (Love, 2023). This report not only subjected public education to increased examination, but it also fueled anti-Black sentiments, subsequently resulting in the withdrawal of financial support and disassembly of public schools. Love (2023) argued that throughout Ronald Reagan's presidency, there was a significant lack of attention given to education, economic support, and legal protection for Black individuals. Love contended that this worldview has led to several adverse consequences for Black individuals (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Therefore, the idea of anti-Blackness serves as a heuristic tool, offering nuanced insights into the enduring challenges that Black folks encounter, such as the systematic denial of educational chances (Ross, 2021).

Consequences of the Racism Experienced by Black Students

The cumulative occurrences of racial discrimination in educational environments, including the utterance of racial slurs, the exclusion of cultural practices from the curriculum, and biased conduct by school staff, result in a degree of psychological distress that is akin to the trauma caused by overt traumatic incidents. Comas-Díaz (2016) argued that educational institutions should acknowledge and address race-related trauma to promote the comprehensive growth of students, encompassing their academic, psychological, and social well-being.

According to a National School Boards Association (NSBA) publication, in 2017, there were around 50.7 million children enrolled in American schools, with approximately 7.7 million of them identifying as Black (Negrón et al., 2017). The Black Students in the Condition of Education 2020 report highlighted the presence of an achievement disparity between Black and White individuals (Cai, 2020). Despite the country's efforts to narrow the deficit, the progress made has been negligible. Black children face disproportionately high levels of socio-economic poverty and, despite the prevalence of digital technology in today's society, they still have restricted access to the internet in their own residences (Negrón et al., 2017). The graduation rates for Black students continue to be low, while the dropout rates remain high (Caruthers, 2006; King & Ladson-Billings, 1990; Negrón et al., 2017). According to Robin Hamilton, the United States allocates the highest amount of funds towards education, although this does not consistently result in favorable educational achievements for all students (Hamilton, 2020). Furthermore, educational institutions that cater to a larger proportion of minority individuals often employ professors who possess less experience, receive lower salaries, and possess lower qualifications (Hamilton, 2020 Vaught, 2009).

More situationally, during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 40,000 children in the United States experienced the unfortunate loss of a parent due to the virus. According to Thomas (2021), there was a disproportionate impact on Black children, who make up only 14% of children in the U.S. yet account for 20% of those who have lost a parent to COVID-19 (Wellington, 2023). These statistics indicate that certain students lack the requisite assistance to effectively navigate the challenges they encounter. Individuals who face oppression based on their race, social class, and gender often encounter additional elements such as COVID-19, which intensify their subjugation and hinder their progress due to the increased uncertainty in their lives. Subsequently, these students proceeded to school, where they encountered additional ambiguity.

Exploring Critical Race Theory with Storytelling

In United States education, the balance of Black narratives is absent (Gay, 2010). A prevalent observation in the reviewed literature is the pervasive nature of the culture of Whiteness in educational institutions, which is evident in curricula, teaching methodologies, codes of discipline, administrative practices, and policymaking (Bell, 2003; Brown, 2011; Caruthers, 2006; Juárez & Hayes, 2010). CRT appreciates the experience of Black individuals which differs from one to the other. It recognizes that each person carries their own normative universe in which they carry with them, and how they operate as a person. In 1989, Richard Delgado argued that stories depicting the realities of Black and Brown lives can aid individuals in establishing a "consensus" and mutual understanding regarding their shared experiences, thereby fostering recognition of alternative life possibilities beyond their own (Delgado, 1989). Storytelling for Black individuals has historically had a transformative and long-lasting impact on African Americans' lives (Bell, 2003; Goss & Barnes 1989; Willis et al., 2002).

In essence, storytelling serves as a bridge between students' personal experiences and formal schooling (Deniston-Trochta, 2003; Gay, 2010), fostering the development of students' identity, voice, and enthusiasm for learning (Ellison, 2017; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Peerless, 2014). This study lays the groundwork for understanding how Black students employ storytelling to communicate their encounters with race in K-12 educational environments. It aims to provide insight for future research endeavors.

Method

The aim of this study was to uncover the often-overlooked experiences of Black students of color in K-12 school environments. The central question guiding our investigation was: How does Anti-Blackness manifest, confront, and propagate within K-12 educational settings in a specific school district on the West coast of the United States?

Data Collection

We opted for a qualitative approach due to its ability to provide narrative depth and context rather than a cause-and-effect design (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Glesne, 1999). Our data collection involved interviews, social media posts, and documents, all of which were instrumental in conveying experiences within a particular West coast school district. In the initial stages of the study, we conducted interviews with the founders of the anti-racist movement. These interviews aimed to understand the multifaceted obstacles faced by students, including derogatory language, suppression, omission, and widespread discrimination against Black individuals within educational settings. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted using the Zoom digital platform.

We collected documents from participants, including anonymous storytelling from a digital platform. These documents aimed to explore the convictions, principles, and encounters of racial trauma among Black students over a four-month period across schools within a large district. The digital narratives were systematically extracted, securely stored, and meticulously organized. This process ensured the removal of all identifying

information, with individuals and schools assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Participants

This work was conducted between 2020 and 2021. During this time, the world was in a critical state due to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd which pushed the protests. The research team reached out to the two participants that spearheaded the movement to provide other Black students of color opportunities to share their frustrations being of color in their school district. The research team developed a relationship with the movement founders, where they described the use of using a digital public space for anti-racist education, dialogue, and solidarity in support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the welfare of Black students of color (SoC) within a school district and community in a large West coast state. We are unsure of the anti-Blackness position within the districts that participated in this study; therefore, we focus on the experiences noted by the students on a digital platform that may assume anti-Blackness existed or was projected upon them.

Through an online digital page, 522 K-12 students anonymously shared personal narratives concerning racism, injustices, microaggressions, gatekeeping, trauma, and violence encountered in their daily school environments. The information collected from the public online digital page was considered public forms that did not require consent. In addition, unique identifiers or pseudonyms were assigned to each school to maintain confidentiality throughout the study.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The researchers used open coding and axial coding techniques to create clear and succinct narratives focusing on students' experiences with anti-blackness and racism. These methods were adopted to facilitate the development of codes, patterns, and categories, which resulted in the identification of themes from the dataset. Initially, the researchers examined and compiled 522 digital tales based on racial demographics. Subsequently, we narrowed down the selection to 219 digital stories that were specifically categorized as Black. Looking at the content and post following multiple rounds of transcription, we commenced with the open coding by identifying ideas, patterns and characteristics that highlight the students' experiences pertaining to racism and anti-blackness. Table 1 below highlights the open coding from the data.

During axial coding, we examined the data we collected by utilizing the most conceptual concepts derived from the data to facilitate the formation of patterns that contribute to the emergence of categories and themes. As the data became clearer and the researchers' noticed patterns from the study's participants, they held conversations to improve and reclassify the codes that had been created. After completing multiple coding iterations, the researchers combined and consolidated codes comparable in nature. Categories arose due to the congruence of data codes, leading to the emergence of two distinct themes. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, we employed members checking and enlisted the assistance of an external researcher to examine the data and offer guidance on coding in cases where discrepancies occurred.

Table 1. Exemplar of Codes

Codes	Definition	Example
Unsympathetic	Lack of sympathy for those who experienced racial basis	<i>I was at a football game and our best player, who was Black, was doing phenomenally well. I heard two White boys in front of me go, "Wow he's really good" and the other goes "Ya but we don't like Black people who aren't good at anything anyways".</i>
Erasure	Experience voice is dismissed/erased/discouraged	<i>A couple weeks into my freshman year of high school a senior in my class threw a cotton ball on the ground and said, "hey n****r go pick that cotton" and I reported it and they did nothing.</i>
Learned Helplessness of Teachers	Refusal, Resistance, and Negotiation in spaces that are known to be Anti-Black or Racist;	<i>My sophomore year there was a picture taken of the football team or the wrestling team I can't remember which but there were 10 boys wearing KKK mask and admin didn't even punish any of the boys they just gave the same old no place for hate BS talk.</i>

Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed yielded two themes: (a) friendly frame, and (b) the experiences of Black students in K-12 settings. These themes represent the diverse encounters of Black students, along with the mechanisms that perpetuate discrimination against Black individuals in different educational environments, such as the physics classroom, photography classroom, and football games. This underscores the necessity for pedagogical approaches that actively combat racism. The participants' own words, presented digitally, provided the evidence that led to the identification of certain themes, which are outlined below.

Friendly Frame

The initial theme emphasized in our research findings is "Friendly Frame." In the present scenario, a "Friendly Frame" refers to someone whom the Black student, under the given setting, perceives as a friend but is harboring discriminatory sentiments towards those of Black ethnicity. Within the context of adopting an antiracist pedagogical approach and acknowledging the detrimental effects experienced by Black students, we draw attention to the courageous act of Student A, who shared their narrative below:

A student at my physics table seemed to think he was sitting with people who would sympathize with his views. He tried to tell me that slavery should still be legal and that there was nothing wrong with it. He was openly racist, transphobic, and sexist on campus and it was tolerated by most staff, under the guise

of 'differing opinions' - Smitty High School, '16.

In this caption, the student openly stated his desire for slavery to be legal, highlighting the explicit and sometimes implicit harm students face daily. Imagine what it feels like as a Black student not to make slavery their reality, what they may feel when hearing this student convey this message, and what it might feel like to survive the education system, to survive and be educated in an anti-Black world that aims to make the "dark body, mind, and spirit breakable and disposable" (Love, 2023, p. 39).

As we progressed through our study, we found other narratives that resonated with anti-Blackness themes in this school system and the need for antiracist pedagogy. Below are the narratives from a student's post and relationship with anti-Blackness.,

One day in photography class, a White student sitting next to me went on a rant about how he HATED Black people. So, I looked at him like wth??? I was the only Black person in my class, so I felt like all my eyes were on me, waiting for a reaction. Quickly, he turned to me and said, 'Not you! I mean the lazy ones on welfare and do drugs all day.' I had several classes with him and since he was in my AVID class, I had to have a class with him every year. I should've taught him a lesson because to this day he posts racist posts on Facebook and claims to not be racist because he has Black friends. Which is ironic because he clearly said he HATES Black people. He was part of the baseball team, and I would always hear him, and his teammates make racist remarks about our Black football players. I was so glad to graduate and get away from that school. It made me think how many more of my non-Black friends secretly hate Black people. Even some teachers reached out to me after graduation and asked what was the deal with that student smh. - Dolphin High School, '13

Once again, the student experienced the use of disparaging and abusive language targeting individuals of Black ancestry, being the sole representative of this racial group within the classroom. Student B experienced overt oppression and mistreatment, as his racial identity as a Black individual was significantly devalued by his classmate, who used insulting language. This mistreatment was compounded by the fact that the classmate presented themselves as a "friend," despite the possibility that the derogatory language may have been directed towards Student B's Black family and friends. In this instance, we draw upon Jamila Lyiscott's conceptualization of oppression to elucidate the manner in which Student B experienced oppression.

The present circumstances additionally imply a hidden assumption regarding the teacher's lack of knowledge in effectively addressing racial tensions and White privilege within the classroom. This might potentially lead to a misinterpretation of the teacher's actions as condoning mistreatment towards Black students (Lyiscott, 2019). Lyiscott (2019) asserted that educators must be mindful of the systemic nature of Whiteness and its influence beyond physical appearance, as failure to do so will impede effective efforts to address it (p. 6).

In the given scenario, the student observed instances of racism both in person and on social media but refrained from addressing them. Upon completing their studies, Student B made the conscious decision to disengage from

their immediate surroundings due to the anxiety they experienced during their time as a student within this educational institution. The students showed a strong commitment towards altering their understanding of the world and their personal circumstances (Anzaldúa, 2015). Student B demonstrated an understanding that experiencing harm within the educational environment is unacceptable. Consequently, they made a conscious decision to transform their encounters into a valuable resource that could be utilized in the future. This experience has the potential to empower others by raising awareness about the inherent dangers faced by Black students within schools, as well as encouraging Black students to remain vigilant regarding their interactions with White individuals in these settings.

The Experiences of Black Students in K-12 Settings

The dehumanization of Black students within K-12 educational settings has become a troubling aspect of their academic journey. Often, these students are perceived beyond their educational merit, encompassing broader societal contexts where their identities are diminished and frequently commodified. This objectification extends to the exploitation of Black physical and intellectual abilities, with teachers inadvertently perpetuating damaging stereotypes. Such perspectives not only diminish the uniqueness of Black students but also hinder their overall growth and progress in both their education and personal life.

The objectification and appropriation of the Black body have manifested in deeply troubling ways, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and historical prejudices. As evidenced in the following example:

At a football game, I overheard two White boys commenting on our best player, who was Black. One remarked, 'Wow, he's really good,' to which the other responded, 'Yeah, but we don't like Black people who aren't good at anything. I mean, he's athletic so that'll get him somewhere.' Another friend laughed and added, 'He runs like an ape anyway.' Unbeknownst to them, a Black person was nearby. The situation was addressed. :) -Berry Jerry High School, '21

According to Nussbaum (1995), objectification occurs when a person is treated merely as a means to fulfill someone else's goals, devoid of their own thoughts or abilities. In this instance, the excessive emphasis on the physical abilities of Black students underscores a societal tendency to view them as commodities, valuing their athleticism over their intellectual capabilities. This dehumanizing perspective distorts the unique characteristics of Black students and perpetuates detrimental racial stereotypes.

The reliance on Black individuals' physical prowess in sports reflects a concerning pattern where they are primarily valued for their athletic talents rather than their overall capabilities. Within K-12 educational settings, this perpetuates narrow-minded narratives that belittle Black students' abilities and reinforce harmful racialized expectations. Furthermore, the influence of cultural settings in shaping the experiences of Black students within K-12 educational settings cannot be overstated. Instances of objectification through anti-Blackness are not isolated events but are often deeply ingrained in educational systems. These subtle cues, biases, and racially insensitive remarks contribute to a hostile atmosphere for Black students, affecting their sense of belonging and academic

success.

For instance, consider the experience shared by a student:

In my high school choir class, the teacher, who was White, often emphasized her race and the advantages it afforded her. She displayed indifference towards students of color, especially Black students, and referred to us as 'exotic.' Looking back, her actions were rife with micro-aggressions, as she claimed not to 'see color' while singling out her Black students and making them visibly uncomfortable. -Bayside High School, '22

In this case, the educator's objectification stemmed from viewing Whiteness through a property lens, reinforcing systemic racism. Consequently, teachers, often unwittingly, contribute to a culture that perpetuates stereotypes and promotes racial insensitivity. Moreover, the students involved in these highlighted instances expressed their observations regarding the presence of anti-Black sentiments. They also shed light on the role of teachers in fostering a racially discriminatory atmosphere for both White folks and Black individuals. The concept is vividly depicted in the following transcription:

During my time at ABHS there was a group of White kids who identified themselves as White supremacists. They had swastikas on their backpacks and spoke about their "White pride" publicly. I am Black and sat next to one of them in my clothing class. I was extremely uncomfortable and asked my teacher if I could switch seats. My teacher said no, and these kids never got in trouble despite spreading their White pride hate speech. They eventually graduated. -ABHS, 2005

In this statement, Student C tells their story of their personal experience observing the influence of White supremacy, the manifestation of White supremacist actions, and the persistence of these ideologies inside educational settings. They highlight the amplification of hate speech and the absence of proactive measures to address anti-Blackness and allow Black students to feel more welcome. Regrettably, the experience of Student C illustrates the notion that individuals of Black descent are simultaneously visible and invisible, while individuals of White descent possess the advantage of disregarding, dismissing, and overlooking fundamental human rights for Black individuals, such as their ability to do more than share space and exist (Love, 2023). Fundamentally, Student C's poignant testimony serves as a reminder of the need to actively confront and dismantle White supremacist ideologies within educational settings, fostering environments where all students are truly seen, heard, and empowered to thrive.

Conclusion

In exploring the phenomenon of the "Friendly Flame," we situate it within the wider discourse of dismantling the structures of White supremacy, as proposed by Dumas and Ross (2016). The origins of anti-Blackness within the educational system echo historical trajectories, notably illuminated in documents such as "A Nation at Risk" during the Reagan administration (Love, 2023). This report intensified scrutiny of public education and fueled anti-Black sentiments, resulting in the defunding, and dismantling of public schools. Love's argument resonates

with the paradigm initiated by Reagan, accentuating educational neglect, economic deprivation, and systemic issues perpetuated by the government (Dumas & Ross, 2016; Love, 2023; Ross, 2021). The emergence of anti-Blackness, deeply entrenched in Reagan's influence, provides an analytical framework to interpret instances of racism within educational discourse, shining a light on the enduring challenges faced by Black individuals, including the systematic deprivation of educational opportunities (Ross, 2021).

Exploring the objectification of Black bodies within K-12 settings, we contextualize it within the systemic anti-Blackness prevalent in the educational landscape. The roots of anti-Blackness, traced back to the Reagan era, perpetuate harmful stereotypes and racialized expectations. The objectification of Black bodies, whether physical or intellectual, underscores a broader societal issue where Black students are often valued more for their physical abilities than their overall capabilities (Nussbaum, 1995). The examples provided, including the fetishization of athletic prowess and the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes by teachers, highlight the urgent need to address racial insensitivity in educational settings. This section emphasizes the importance for educators to recognize, challenge, and actively dismantle systemic anti-Blackness within K-12 environments to foster an inclusive and equitable educational atmosphere.

Our study highlights the pressing need for educators to disrupt entrenched systems that perpetuate harm against Black students within educational institutions. Building on insights from scholars like Love (2023), we stress the ongoing efforts necessary to tackle existing challenges within educational systems. Our research uncovers systemic failures within the institution under examination, revealing the neglect of Black students' needs and the suppression of their voices. The prioritization of maintaining a peaceful classroom atmosphere over confronting White supremacist beliefs has perpetuated harm against Black students, underscoring the urgency for change.

We advocate for educators and learners to prioritize the development of heightened racial awareness and understanding. Despite our recognition of inherent biases as Black women scholars and practitioners, our study underscores the psychological distress experienced by Black students due to the absence of antiracist teaching methods, which fosters a hostile educational atmosphere characterized by mistreatment. While our study did not extensively evaluate teachers' attitudes and prejudices, evidence suggests that White students often express beliefs about Black people without considering the emotions or experiences of their Black peers. This disregard for students of color perpetuates their subjugation and continuous harm in educational environments.

In summary, our study serves as a call to action for educators and stakeholders to confront systemic anti-Blackness and create inclusive educational environments that prioritize the well-being and success of all students. Through collective effort and a commitment to antiracist practices, we can work towards a more equitable and just educational system. Addressing objectification and Whiteness requires a comprehensive approach that surpasses individual actions. Educators must acknowledge the ramifications of racially insensitive behavior and its impact on Black students in K-12 environments. It is imperative for educators to demonstrate a commitment to dismantling the systemic presence of anti-Blackness within educational settings, including acknowledging, and rectifying their own biases to foster an inclusive environment where all students, regardless of racial heritage, can thrive academically and personally.


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