

SAY IT LOUD!: AN IDENTITY INTERSECTION AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS TOLD  
BY A BLACK FEMALE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR TO AFFLUENT  
WHITE STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS.

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

A person is not just one identity, they are many. All of their identities intersect to make the person who they are. In this autoethnographic narrative, I describe how my upbringing and racialized experiences shaped my identity. I discuss the marginalization I had to overcome from a young age to adulthood. Walls have been built and barriers are broken throughout this autoethnography, and you will see the obstacles I overcame as a middle-class, Black, female educator of wealthy, early childhood White students. This autoethnography is introduced and presented through a series of personal reflective vignettes supported by the literature on anti-Black and intersectionality to explore and synthesize for the purpose of understanding who is it that the early childhood students and their parents want me to be, and what kind of early childhood educator I want to be. There was a lot of struggle with my identity throughout the years, and there were a lot of internal changes I had to make before those transformations could be seen externally.

## **I. INTRODUCTION: “SAY IT LOUD!...”**

When I was seven, I went over to my friend’s house to swim and spend the night. I was so excited because her parents had just built a pool, and she had no one to swim with. They had a beautiful, big house and a pretty pool. I remember my mom telling me to be on my best behavior and to use my manners because they were White and on the “rich-side”. I remember spending the day with my friend and her mom, watching a movie, getting our nails done, and swimming in her pool. Things got a little weird when her dad came home, and this became my first experience with racism and marginalization.

I was eating with them, and her White father came home from work. He had a surprised look on his face when he saw me. I introduced myself and he didn’t say anything to me, he just nodded. He sat down with us and started asking me questions as we were eating. The first few questions were typical, how’s school (good), how many siblings (two brothers), and how old are they (twelve and two). It became uncomfortable when he asked me, “So where does your father work?” I told him that he drove a big truck for a delivery company. He said, “Oh, that’s good. So, where, does your older

brother's dad work?" I was confused. I told him that he drove a big truck for a delivery company to which he said, "So, both of your fathers work together?" I said that we only had one father. He said that was interesting. *Okay?* He asked me what my mother did for work. I told him she taught high school and young adults how to get jobs. He said "Okay. So, have your parents only been married a few years?" I gave another confused look. He said, "Since your brother is twelve, then that means they've been married only like four or 5 years." I wasn't sure if this was a question, so I didn't answer it. I notice that her mom was hitting his shoulder and telling him to stop. He laughed her off and kept going.

During the duration of my time there, he pretty much ignored me, which was fine, because he left a bad taste in my mouth. I couldn't wait for my dad to pick me up the next day. Let's fast forward to her Summer birthday party. It wasn't just me at the party; there were other kids too. However, I noticed that he wasn't treating me the way he was treating the other children. If I laughed too loud, he would tell me, "Too loud!" If I was following the other girls inside the house, he grabbed me by my shoulder and told me to stop running in the house. When it was time to pass out the cake, he didn't give me a slice, and he was the one cutting it. I think it was her aunt who finally gave me a slice after everyone had already started eating. To say I felt unwelcomed was an understatement! It was a slumber party too, but I used someone's phone to call my mom and she sent my dad to pick me up. When my dad asked why I was coming home, I told him that I missed home, which wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth either.

I started to ignore my friend when I came back to school. I felt bad because she didn't have very many friends because she had Albinism, and very few people wanted to hang out with her due to that (I just thought she was a lighter- skinned girl). She was so

nice, funny, and a true friend but, I just couldn't get past how her dad had treated me and things he asked. A few weeks into the school year, she invited me over to her house. I told her I had to ask my mom and that they could make arrangements, but the more I thought about going to her house, the less I wanted to go, and I just felt very confused. I thought to myself, 'He lives there, and she was an only child; I can't really avoid him... my mom likes her mom, and I didn't want to wreck that friendship...her mom was White and she was nice to me, so she had to marry someone who was nice too; maybe he was just making jokes...also, if I said I didn't really want to go over there, my mom would ask me too many questions that I wouldn't feel like answering.'" So, I went and sought a straightforward source that I knew wouldn't sugar coat anything for a little girl and would actually help my confusing thoughts: my older brother.

I went into my older brother's room (which he never let me go into) and just started telling him everything that had happened. From the first time I went to her house to every encounter I had with her father, and from her inviting over recently to how confused I felt about not going. I didn't even know he was listening until he quirked an eyebrow at the part when I told him he grabbed my shoulder; he never took his CD player headphones off, so there were no signs of attention until that moment! After I was finished, he took off his headphones, looked at me like I was dumb, and said slowly, "Chans, he's a racist." I knew what racism was, but I had never witnessed it so openly and upfront like that before.

Did I forget to mention that I was Black? Did I forget to mention that my friend and her family were White (I think I might have hinted at that)? Did I forget to mention that at her party, I was the only Black person? I'm going to keep it real, I'm used to being

the only Black person anywhere I go. It's common in the part of Texas where I reside. This was also my first experience with what I would learn later to be racial microaggression (Henfield, 2011, p. 142). That man was disgusting, and he taunted and humiliated a child, because at the end of the day, that's what I was; a child. All he saw, was my Black skin, kinky hair, and made his assumptions.

My friend's father had eluded to a few stereotypes that marginalizes Black women and men -unwed parenting; unskilled workers, loud, absent fathers, etc.. I think it upset him and he was so mean to me when I came back over there because my family structure did not fit a stereotype that he believed; or maybe he still would've been mean to me because I'm Black. Either way, he humiliated a child and for what? To murder her spirit (Love, 2016)? To racially isolate his daughter and end the friendship she had with a Black person? Or because he was a White man, and I was a Black child in his house, and he knew he could?

### **Problem Statement**

As a four-year educator with an undergraduate degree in Elementary Education, I have worked in many different classrooms over the years, and I have worked with infants to 6<sup>th</sup> graders. However, the classroom in which I currently teach has been the only one that has actually felt like mine. When I've worked in other daycare facilities, it felt like I was only supervising students and not really teaching them. Most of the kids' parents were either really sensitive in terms of engagement and what information was shared about their child or they were teachers' kids; I never felt like I had free reign to educate them because I was always walking on eggshells. Now that I am working as a private-school Pre-K teacher, I can put my educational skillset and expertise to use!

Unfortunately, in this position, I have become known as the ‘mean, ghetto, irresponsible, and disrespectful teacher’ amongst the White parents of my students.

. As the title of my thesis implies, I am Black, I am a woman, and I am an educator. I am also a daughter. I grew up in middle class in a rural setting. I am educated, and there are many other identities that I will mention in my thesis that intersect as my identity as a teacher. Kimberlé Crenshaw defines intersectionality as when multiple parts one’s identity that are marginalized in society such as Blackness and femininity come together as the assumptions of others (Crenshaw, 1989; Gillborn, 2015). “Anti-Blackness” as a systemic violence in school settings is an aspect, as a Black educator, that I will explore in my autoethnography (Love, 2016; Bryan, 2021). Anti-Blackness is “not simply racism against Black people [rather, it] refers to a broader antagonistic relationship between Blackness and (the possibility of) humanity” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 429). These intersectionalities will be explored throughout my autoethnography.

I am “mean” because I tell my students no when they put themselves in danger? Am I “ghetto” because I raise my voice at them? Am I “irresponsible” because I wrote your child an incident report today? Am I “disrespectful” because I roll my neck and purse my lips as I read the kids a story just to put more emphasis in the characters? I was just being myself, but I couldn’t be my Black female-self around, mostly, White rich kids and their parents. I have to either code-switch or become their assumption... a mean, ghetto, irresponsible, and disrespectful Black educator.

As Early Childhood educator, we are always told to get to know our students. According to *These Kids Are Out of Control* (Milner et al., 2019), we are told to integrate culturally responsive practices into classrooms with teachers and students from different

cultural backgrounds. I allowed my students to bring in their cultural background, so why couldn't I? If I brought even a little bit of my Blackness into the classroom, the parents would have a fit. "Have a fit" would not be Standard American English or that would be in a thesis, but code-meshing (Young et al., 2014) is something that I will bring into my autoethnography. Code-meshing and code-switching are when a person switches in and out of the 'codes' of a language or meshes them together. I will use my language and my story to answer this question. How can I bring who I am into MY classroom and still be accepted and welcomed? It has felt as if there is not a grey area, and the parents want me to be Black so they can tell their friends that they were cultured and diverse because their kids' Pre-K teacher was Black, but they didn't want me to be Black; they wanted me to be Black and act White.

### **Purpose of Study**

I had always wondered if the parents would have called me these names had I been White. Would they have called me "mean" and "irresponsible" if my skin was White and my eyes were blue? Would they have thought I was "ghetto" and "disrespectful" if my hair was long and straight instead of short and kinky? The purpose of my autoethnography is to give a voice to Black female Early Childhood educators who have broken their stereotypes yet cannot be comfortable in their classrooms because other people assume they are still their stereotype.

### **Methodology**

For this research, I chose autoethnography because it is a method that provides particular voices to help describe everyday encounters with ascribed racialisation

(Tewolde, 2020). I was looking up autoethnographies about the situations that I had encountered, but I was not finding anything. I know that there are other Black, female educators that go through this, but they may not have the outlet that I have to voice their concerns or opinions. The reason I chose autoethnography is to give a voice to Black female Early Childhood educators who have broken their stereotypes yet cannot be comfortable in their classrooms because other people assume they are still their stereotype.

We need to know that we are not alone. I want my experiences to help someone who is going through the same thing or something similar, or to help that parent who may be the one assuming the worst about their child's teacher. I want to give a voice to the Black teacher that is having to construct a new identity to survive in the classroom, or teachers construct an identity throughout their lives that the parents of the families they serve are uncomfortable with. Black teachers, like me, expend a lot of energy creating identities in the classroom just to feel that they are safe and welcomed. My autoethnography will show what happens to an Early Childhood teacher who has overcome her stereotypes just to have them thrown right back in her face due to assumptions based on ignorance.

### **Research Question(s)**

1. Who do my Early Childhood students and their parents want me to be?
  - a. A Black Early Childhood teacher who acts White in the classroom?
  - b. A Black Early Childhood teacher who is herself in the classroom?

2. What kind of Early Childhood educator do I want to be in the classroom?
  - a. An Early Childhood educator who teaches the way that she was taught?
  - b. An Early Childhood educator who has to change who she is for her White students?

One usually finds research questions in a Master's Thesis that are more generally about the field of study. However, I have chosen autoethnography as my methodology and chosen to answer research questions that I feel have answers that parents, educators and me individually need to hear the answers to, because I am more than what the father in my introduction saw, and in this autoethnography, I will call attention to a new voice in education. I am not the only Early Childhood educator who has been through or seen something like this. I cannot be put into one box, no one should be. I'm doing this autoethnography in a non-traditional way by telling my story so those educators can know what to do and how to react to situations like this. I also want them to know that they are not alone because, sometimes it is a lonely feeling. I want other Black female Early Childhood educators to know that I'm here, and I feel you!

Since I've been a Pre-K teacher, I've had to ask myself many questions. Some of them have everything to do with who I am and want to be, but some have nothing to do with and everything to do with how others see me. To provide an answer to these questions, my autoethnography will show you how I grew up and how I brought my upbringing into the classroom. There are different intersections of a person, and I will show you that I am not just a teacher, but a female, a Black female, and a Black female teacher. I will discuss the differences between code-switching and code-meshing to prove

which one works better and is healthier for my identity. There are different methods of culturally responsive teaching and I will discuss what worked for my students and me. Intersectionality, code-switching, code-meshing, culturally responsive teaching and other terms that apply to the exploration of the identity of an early childhood educator will be defined and described in the literature review of this thesis. There are many Early Childhood educators in my situation, and if they cannot use their voice, then I will.

## **II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **African American Vernacular English v. Standard American English**

There is a certain way I talk to people who I know, that won't judge me, and there is a way I talk to people I don't know, who will judge me. According to Daria Hill (2009), students who speak Black English used their home language of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in their writing as a way to give a voice to it. AAVE speakers are typically made to feel inadequate or inferior to Standard American English (SAE) speakers, however, both people are bringing their home language to the classroom and should be respected by both parties (Hill, 2009). I never knew that I had my own language, but I knew that I was switching it around when the time was deemed necessary.

### **Code-switching v. Code-meshing**

I was taught that if I wanted a job, I had to use my "White people" voice. I had to speak to White people a certain way that was uncommon in my household because I was taught that White people run the world. The term code-switching has been used among people, most likely Black people, for a very long time (McCluney et al., 2019, para. 2). Code-switching is "...adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities" (McCluney et al., 2019, para. 3). I started

code-switching when I was very young, and I don't really remember not code-switching when I was around White people.

Code-switching is a lot of work because sometimes we forget who we are, and we forget who we are offending or alienating in the process. McCluney, Robotham, Lee, Smith, and Durkee's (2019) "Costs of Code-Switching" article talks about the psychological toll it has on Black people. "Downplaying one's racial group can generate hostility from in-group members, increasing the likelihood that those who code-switch will be accused of "acting White" (McCluney et al., 2019, para. 6). So, I must belittle who I am and my language in order to "fit in" with people who are comfortable being a part of a conversation? And not be frustrated?

I've had to code-switch for so long that I didn't even know I was doing it until I went to college. I would look at other Black people in classes and think to myself, "How is the professor letting them talk like that? We are in front of White people...TALK LIKE THEM!!!" I associated talking Black around White people as a sign of disrespect towards them. According to the Conference on College Composition and Communication of the National Council of Teachers of English (CCCC/NCTE, 2020), Black students should be able to use their Black language in academia because it reflects Black experiences, traditions, and socially real truths (CCCC/NCTE, 2020). The CCCC also states that teachers should stop using and teaching Standard American English as the only accepted communicative norm because it advocates White mainstream English at the cost of sacrificing students' home language (CCCC/NCTE, 2020). I was always taught that Black language was always wrong, it was never right or accepted. Since some of the

phrases we said were not always familiar to them, I adjusted my speech entirely to fit their needs, but not my own.

It wasn't until I got to college that I started to bring my home language into my academic and work life. I was more comfortable around people if I mixed my home language with theirs. The term code-meshing refers to "...an approach to writing and interpreting texts that advocates for blending language codes in the classroom..." (Young et al., 2014, p. 234). In other words, code-meshing is when I can use my Black language and the language that I'm learning in school (Standard American English) together in my writing and speech. Young et al. (2014) discuss in *Other People's English: Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African American Literacy* which method the speaker of the two languages prefers; code-switching or code-meshing. The results were that people would rather code-mesh because it shows others that they respect other people's languages and their own too. I've always respected other people's languages, and now I respect my own too.

I now code-mesh in my personal, work, and academic life. Code-meshing is when the home language and Standard American English are mixed together in conversation and writing. Marshall (2018) states in the research article, *To Correct or Not Correct: Confronting Decisions about African American Students' Use of Language Varieties in the English Classroom*, that a researcher went into two different English Classrooms and studied how the students' demeanor was in the classroom that used Standard American English only and the one that used code-meshing. "Marie believed when students were interacting with her and their peers informally, they should be free to "let their freak vibe fly" (Marshall, 2018, p. 53) and use the form of English with which they felt most

comfortable—with no profanity” (Marshall, 2018, p. 53). The author concluded that the teacher who allowed her students to code-mesh were happier, their writing scores increased, and they felt closer to their teacher. Although the teacher was White and most of the students in the class were Black, the students felt close to her. Since I had to code-switch around my White teachers, I never felt close to them, and I think they were okay with that.

### **Culturally Responsive Classroom**

Most upcoming Early Childhood Education teachers are taught to create a culturally responsive classroom in the future. Being culturally responsive is to “incorporate elements of students’ home, personal, and community lives into the classroom (Monroe & Obidah, 2004 quoted in Milner et al., 2019, p. 27). I would like to say that I experienced a culturally responsive classroom when I was in school and that I was so enamored by my teacher’s incorporation of everyone’s heritage, that I decided I will do the same things they did...WRONG! Boutte, King, Johnson, and King’s (2021) *We Be Lovin’ Black Children* is a pro-Black based book with strategies that help bring everyone together in the classroom culturally and academically. There are many strategies that teachers for all age groups can use and there are also activities that the students, teachers, families, and communities can engage in, so the classroom is one big family. It takes a village to teach a child, and everyone has to be on board to help. The teachers that I had only reached out to my mom when something was about to come up (e.i. Back to School Night, Parent-Teacher Conferences, etc.). They never reached out to my parents on what my home language was, what my favorite food was, or the music I

liked to listen to. The teachers thought that since I was doing my work, that I was happy in the classroom, but I wasn't.

Boutte, King, Johnson and King (2021) write that one of the ways we can bring the class together, is by using pro-Black based readings into the classroom. To liberate the Black spirit is to provide stories written by Black authors through every historical period (Boutte et al., 2021). In school, I didn't read any Black literature. Every lesson about Black history started with slavery and ended with Martin Luther King Jr. (in February of course). Had everyone in my class had rich Black literature within their reach, they may have had more positive reactions for my race just like I had for theirs. I'd rather students get introduced to Black history through literature than through a video of peaceful Black protestors being hosed down by firetrucks.

There is significance in managing your classroom. All of my Texas State professors used to tell me that as long as you get to know your students, the classroom will flow and align better. Milner, Cunningham, O'Connor, and Kestenberg's (2019) book, *These Kids Are Out Of Control*, shows different strategies and ways to manage the classroom. The book tells teachers that we have to reimagine the classroom from the students' point of view (Milner et al., 2019). We need to find the students' comfort level in the classroom to achieve success within the classroom.

### **Identity**

Black people get many assumptions placed on them. According to In Amira Davis (2009), Black women only get hysterectomies because they want them or don't want kids. However, she writes in her autoethnography that White women get a pass because

they are perceived as only getting hysterectomies when there are life threatening reasons (Davis, 2009). The assumption is that Black women are requesting hysterectomies because of their prerogative. Whereas White women are only receiving hysterectomies under life-threatening situations, which positions White women as practical and should be understood and Black women as selfish and inconsiderate (Davis, 2019, p. 1305). Life threatening medical concerns don't give passes to people due to their color, so why should we? As a society, we should be past condemning people for making the decisions they make, but I guess that's not how the world works.

The first thing someone notices about anyone is the color of their skin. It's a natural habit to have, but what shouldn't be natural is using someone's physical attributes to determine who they are. Amanuel Tewolde (2020), describes what it was like living in a race-conscious society that based distinctions of people on skin tone (Tewolde, 2020). He didn't know whether people thought he was Indian or Black because people would determine him different things because of his physical Indian features and his physical Black features; never both. This confused him (Tewolde, 2020). When people see my name, they think I am a White male. When people see my race, they think I'm a light-skinned male. When people see my height, they think I'm a short White male. Once they see all three, they think I'm a short, mixed boy. I'm none of those things! Why don't people just greet everyone with an open-mind?

Sometimes I forget that I am more than just a teacher. I am a Black woman, but when teaching White, wealthy students, it's easy to forget. I shouldn't forget it, because my Blackness matters just like their Whiteness matters. In an article that addresses the ways in which racial identity impacts early childhood settings in England, Shaddai

Tembo (2020) discusses how a teacher's Black identity should be made visible in the Early Childhood classroom and not hidden. Shaddai Tembo interviewed Black early childhood educators and concluded that although their Blackness matters, it is viewed negatively to parents within the school (Tembo, 2020). We should show them who we are, so the students won't be so shocked by Black people when they get older. If the parents don't like it, then they can keep their child home where they can be sheltered all their life. Bye!

My identity and I would get into it all the time! I wanted to be Black and fit in with the Black people at school, but I had been acting White for so long that they didn't want to be friends with me. Webb and Linn (2016) used the term Acting White Accusation (AWA) as a negative reaction to behaviors that are considered "White" or foreign among other minority groups. I was always too Black for the White people and too White for the Black people.

I never knew that there were articles and academic papers on identity. I thought that people had already discovered what their identity was by the time they were writing papers. However, Ritchey (2014) explores finding identity. She wrote that there is a four-stage model of Nigrescence which helps a person find Black identity. Pre-encounter (stage 1) depicts the identity to be changed; I realized that I wanted to be White for so long that I had forgotten what it was to be Black. Encounter (stage 2) isolates the point at which the person feels compelled to change; I isolated myself from White people, and all people, in college my Freshman year just so I could try to find myself again. Immersion-Emersion (stage 3) describes the vortex of identity change; for example, I stopped straightening my hair and took my weave out, letting my natural hair loose. I used my

AAVE when I had a conversation with anyone, including professors just to so they could see that I was my true self. And Internalization and Internalization-Commitment (stages 4) describes the habituation and internalization of the new identity; by Sophomore year, I would wake up and be proud to be Black because I was finally happy with who I was and stopped trying to be someone that I thought other people, White people, should accept. (Ritchey, 2014). This is a paper that I should've read in Pre-K, did every step, and then maybe I wouldn't have struggled with my Black identity for so long.

### **Anti-Blackness**

“Such deficit tropes play themselves out in classrooms and school playgrounds and explain why Black boys are disproportionately suspended and expelled from schools as early as early childhood education. In response, my work builds on antideficit scholarship that pushes against deficit constructions of Black boys, boyhood, and the ways in which Black boys play” (Bryan, 2021, p. 6). I never knew what the word “Anti-Blackness” meant until I left the small town I grew up in and moved to a city full of very diverse and open-minded people. Nathaniel Bryan (2021) describes that Black boys are racialized and gendered during boyhood play. “Mayeza (2017) studied the play behaviors of 64 Black boys (and girls) on a playground in a South African township and found that these children worked to create gender boundaries, meaning that the children were adamant about ensuring they played according to gender norms and expectations and chastised children who transgressed those gender boundaries and expectations” (Bryan, 2021, p. 748). If Black children played to other people's expectations, there would probably be no Black excellence because we would be what most White people expect us to be (thugs, killers, thieves, etc.).

Bryan, himself, used the method of autoethnography in this article about anti-Blackness and recounted a time when he was ten years old and was dribbling a ball down the street, and when a White woman saw him, she immediately got into her car, shut the door, and locked it as he walked by (Bryan, 2021). Because he was Black, the woman automatically thought he was a threat to her. Would the woman have been scared and locked her door if he were White? I've had people follow me around in stores because they thought I would steal. My second job is in retail, and in trainings they state that anyone has the capability to steal, and you should not make assumptions based on physical attributes. I feel certain that they wouldn't have followed me if I were White, though.

Another concept of “anti-Blackness” is spirit murdering (Love, 2013). According to Bettina Love’s article “Anti-Black state violence, classroom edition: The spirit murdering of Black children,” “Spirit murdering within a school context is the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism (Love, 2016, p. 2). Black children in schools are humiliated, reduced, and destroyed by visceral and explicit attacks...” (Love, 2016, p. 2). My mother always told me that while I’m at school, I am in a fishbowl. Any little thing that I do could change my life for the worst because I’m always being watched. I was about six when she told me this, but after seeing what would happen to Black boys in my school and how their consequences were different from White boys who would do the same things, I understood what she meant.

## Intersectionality

A person is many things. They aren't just humans, they are their race, class, body, education, and so much more. According to David Gillborn (2015), intersectionality "...addresses the question of how multiple forms of inequality and identity inter-relate in different contexts and over time, for example, the inter-connectedness of race, class, gender, disability, and so on" (Gilborn, 2015, p. 278). If everyone were just one thing, then life would be boring and predictable. We need to know who we are in the classroom because that shows the students that they can be more than one thing.

Sometimes White women are surprised that I have experienced some of the things that they experience. Given their responses to the stories I share, it seems as though they don't understand that I am human, and a woman. As a Black woman, I am often excluded from doing things that are seen as "White" because I'm Black, "masculine" because I'm a woman, and "proper" because I'm a Black woman. Crenshaw's 1989 paper *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* discusses the multidimensionality of Black women's experiences and how they have been marginalized by others'. "I argue that Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). In other words, Black women are excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policies, because their experiences are too different and don't add up with those of White women. Black women can be feminist and have the same experiences as White women or White feminists.

## Marginalization

I am not what people assume I would be. I wasn't raised the way that other Black students in early childhood centers were raised. McDonald's (2021) *This Ain't What I'm Used to: Reflections of a Black Educator in Rural Black America* is an autoethnography that discusses the teaching experiences a Black social studies teacher, from a predominately White rural area, went through teaching Black students from a predominately Black rural area. "Understanding the relative importance of a Black educator on the impact of Black students calls to question whether it is important for Black teachers to share the same cultural and linguistic background as their students, as the Black experience is not a monolith" (McDonald, 2021 p. 96). Can I educate students that are the same race as me even though I may not have grown up like them or had the same experiences as them? Will the students I teach, who are not the same race as me, take me seriously even though I grew up the same way they did? As a Black child I had to overcome a lot more than a White child would at a very young age. I had to prove myself to people I didn't know and to people who didn't know me. My mom would tell me in the beginning of every school year that I am Black, which meant that I had to be ten times smarter, ten times faster, and ten times stronger than the White people I went to school with. Now that sounds a like a lot of pressure to put on a child, but looking back, she wasn't wrong. Could White children handle all that fire? Or would they just burn?

### III. “...I’M BLACK AND I’M PROUD!”

*“I have been called ghetto because I’m loud and some of my old teachers have thought that I lived in low-income housing.”*

*--Chansler, age 9*

As a Black person, assumptions have been placed on me that are not true at all. Why do some people (White) automatically assume that because I’m loud that I’m ghetto? What does ghetto really mean? According to TIME Magazine, ghetto is a “run-down and crime-ridden African American segregated area” (Schwartz, 2019, para. 1). I am not an area, I am a person. I am also not from the “ghetto;” I’m from the outskirts of Lockhart, Texas, not quite going into Kyle, Texas. I grew up in the country on about five acres of land. I also researched a “ghetto female.” There wasn’t a lot, but I found from Dictionary.com, that a “ghetto girl” adopts an unconventional behavior or look (2021). *They based it off a look?* I wonder what people who called me ghetto see when I came to school in summer dresses, sparkly shoes, and barrettes in my hair? Low key, I still dress like this, minus the barrettes.

I was loud when I was a kid, I will admit that. However, I was only loud because my family was loud. Being loud was how we communicated; it was our love language. I loved school and I loved my friends, so why not use my family’s love language there? I work with wealthy, White children now and they are loud, but I definitely don’t consider them “ghetto”. I’ve Googled their addresses (all Early Childhood teachers get bored during nap time sometimes) and if the definition of “ghetto” is really what it says it is, then my loud students are NOT ghetto! I was called ghetto because I was Black and those

teachers, and people, only saw my skin color when I raised my voice. They didn't see the pretty dresses and shoes I wore, or my hair that my mom neatly pressed and straightened the night before; they only saw my skin and I was considered "ghetto". When a White child was loud, they were just a loud child, no one would dare consider them "ghetto".

I wish my teachers had Googled my house back in the day; they wouldn't have assumed that I lived in low-income housing. If they would've Googled my house, they would've seen a big, yellow house in the middle of nowhere. I never understood that assumption that my teachers (who were White) made about my living arrangements. As I got older, I realized that most of the Black children that they had come across had lived in low-income housing, so they just assumed I did too. My mom drove a Mercedes and my dad drove a brand-new Ford truck. Why would they drive those kinds of cars in the projects? They didn't ask me, and they didn't get to know me. They saw my skin color and just assumed.

I used to resent my Black skin because of the assumptions that people had about me. When I was in high school, my friends would say that they wished they were "darker" or that they couldn't wait until the summer so they could tan and get "darker." That used to bother me because I used to think that there were a lack of assumptions placed on White people, because people don't sneer at them or suck their teeth when they walked into a room because of *their* skin, so why get darker? They were probably saying those things to humiliate me because they knew I didn't want to be any darker at the time. Also, White people, you don't get "darker;" you get RED, there's a difference! As I got older, I figured out how to love my Black skin again. I learned that I am a queen and there's a beautiful history behind my beautiful skin. I had to cut those friends off, because

they used to tell me that I was pretty...for a Black girl. Girl bye, I'm pretty because I'm pretty! Get it right!

I teach children who will grow up wealthy and, more than likely, make their own wealth. Although my parents drove nice cars, we were not rich. We went on trips every two years and never had birthday parties or got birthday presents, because my parents saved it all for Christmas. I was always humble, and I'm teaching my White students to be humble as well. However, it's very hard to do when their parents literally give them the world without earning it, and when the parents think that I should be humble because I'm Black and all Black people are humble, I guess (real talk: one of my old White friends told me that). I often think to myself, "Would my students understand if they were Black?" According to Elizabeth McDonald (2021), due to Black students' potential perceptions of Black teachers as "acting White" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986), Black students are apprehensive of some Black teachers and do not immediately see Black teachers as role models. So, to answer the questions... apparently not! If I actually taught Black students the way I'm "supposed" to teach my White students, they would say I was "acting White." With the curriculum goals and testing questions, Black kids wouldn't swim, they'd sink. This is also a form of spirit-murdering.

If I were to create a curriculum and I am teaching students that curriculum and it "denies them of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance" (Love, 2013, p. 2) then I am spirit-murdering them. I don't get to create the curriculum at the school I work at; it's already created for me and I just create the materials and read a "script". However, if we are learning about families, and I show a student who has two dads a picture of a White man, White woman, a little White boy, and little White girl with a

Golden Retriever and call this photo a “family”, then I’m murdering that child’s spirit, because he or she has none of that in their life. If we are learning about traveling and the curriculum calls for what should be in your suitcase, and the children don’t know what belongs in a suitcase because they’ve never been on a plane or on a vacation due to lack of money; then I am murdering their spirit. The written curriculum that I teach actually says, “The students should have been able to go on a plane by now” *That curriculum is also a travel agent, people!*

My identity and I would go at it a lot through the years! Even in Pre-K I found myself wanting to be White because I thought it would be easier. *If I looked like everyone else, I wouldn’t have hair problems, because it would already be smooth and straight; the other kids wouldn’t talk about my skin like I’m some alien, and they wouldn’t touch my hair and ask me why it feels different!* Of course, that couldn’t happen, but as a four-year-old, I found myself wishing for it a lot.

I used to think that if I talk like a White girl and act like a White girl, then I could possibly be one. However, in doing all that, the other Black girls wouldn’t talk to me. “Acting White” brought up negative reactions from people of my race. According to Webb and Linn (2016), common negative reactions include statements such as, “You act like a White girl,” or, “You talk like a White girl.” I thought being White meant less problems and more acceptance, but acting White just ended with other girls viewing me as not “Black enough”.

White girls will never understand what I go through because they aren’t Black, even though I talked like them and dressed like them. Black girls at my school saw me as something that was foreign to them, so they avoided me. I lived like that since Pre-K, and

it didn't get better until I went to college and had my own classroom. According to Keyiona Ritchey (2014), I had to find my Nigrescence which is interpreted as the developmental process of becoming Black, an explanation of the Black identity and consciousness process for Black Americans. I had to find who I was because although I talked "White" (Standard American English) at school, at home and around my friends, I talked differently. I needed to be who I was wherever I went because I teach my students to embrace their identity and I don't want them to find it in college.

#### **IV. I TALK BLACK AND I'M PROUD!**

I had no idea that I had my own language! I am fluent in two languages: African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard American English (SAE). “Living in a fishbowl” meant that I had to talk like White people, which meant I had to use SAE. At home I talked how I wanted. I was codeswitching and as a kid, to code-switch was normal. My mom did it every time a bill collector called, my dad did it every time a credit card declined at a restaurant, and my older brother did it every time he got in trouble. We called it our “White people voice”. I saw nothing wrong with it and I did it my entire life until I got to college and learned how to code-mesh.

Although I was taught to code-switch, it’s not something that I would recommend teaching to children. According to Daria Hill (2009), there will be resistance from students if they are taught to use standard word choices that do not depict their home language. The only reason why I didn’t resist was because it was the norm and required for me from my parents. Early on, code-switching became comfortable and it finally became uncomfortable when I was eighteen. One of my professors told me that home languages should be respected and used often to teach others to respect them. I agreed, but I never knew that I had my own language, so I thought she was talking about Spanish, Japanese, French, etc. Once I learned about AAVE, I realized that I was disrespecting my own language by hiding it. Who cares if someone doesn’t know what I mean when I say, “That’s what’s up!” or “Back, Back, give me 50 feet!” I will gladly explain to them, if they ask, what it means.

I will be honest; I do code-switch when I interview for a job. According to McCluney, Robotham, Lee, Smith, and Durkee (2019), many Black people code-switch

to sound professional and increase likelihood of being hired for a job. Comedian Dave Chapelle calls Black people's second language as the "interview voice." However, after I get the job, I stop code-switching and start code-meshing. When you're a teacher, you want to be comfortable in your classroom, and I'm more comfortable code-meshing.

I have introduced AAVE with my Early Childhood students. It blew up in my face, but I'm still using it because I allow my students their home language in the class, so I'm using mine. According to CCC/NCTE, there should be classes that teach students that it's okay to use their home language (AAVE, SAE, Spanish, German, etc.) at school. If kids don't know that it's okay, then they'll grow up like me and code-switch. That's why I code-mesh with my students because if they do use another language at home (they don't), I want them to know that it's okay, or when they come across another Black person in their life who uses AAVE, they will understand what they are saying and it won't be a culture shock.

*I asked her, "What's wrong with your arm?" She shook her head and said "Nothing, I'm just rubbing it." I said, "Okay, I was just curious." She looked at me, smiled, and said*

*"Ms. Chansler, you trippin'!"*

*--Chansler, age 25*

This happened not too long ago. It came from one of my students who I saw was rubbing her arm. I thought it was hurting, but she told me she was just rubbing it and that I was "trippin'". I had a feeling that this little White girl didn't learn the word "trippin'" at home! I was already waiting for the email from the parent about how she shouldn't be

learning that kind of language and how they aren't paying all this money to be speaking like that and, blah, blah, blah! *Girl, bye!*

That's how I talk! She used it in the right context when she said it, so she is learning something! She's learning new ways to say "Oh, Ms. Chansler, you're being silly." or "Ms. Chansler, you're not thinking clearly." I feel like my way is nicer and straight to the point. Tanji Reed Marshall (2018) says that students respond and have a better relationship with their teachers when they allow them, and the teachers, to code-mesh. I see language as comfort and as a way to express my love. If I'm not comfortable talking around my students, then I'm not comfortable, period. If the students are with me for a majority of their day and they see that I'm uncomfortable, how are they supposed to be comfortable around me? I love my students too much not to want to communicate with them. I also love myself too much to care about what their parents think about my language... excuse me, my BLACK language.

## V. I'M A WOMAN AND I'M PROUD!

Since I am a woman, I feel like I run the world! It's true because Beyonce wrote a song about it; if Beyonce sang it, then it's deemed true! However, being a woman doesn't mean I'm going to wear an apron, stay home, and have kids...that ain't me! Unfortunately, this next paragraph proves that it's not what everyone thinks.

Earlier this year I went to my mom's 40<sup>th</sup> class reunion. The host had a beautiful ranching business and had a husband that she's been married to for 20 years. I guess you ask people at class reunions how many kids they have because that was a most commonly asked question that night. The host had said that she had no children to which other people said, "Oh no, I'm so sorry." and they were rubbing her shoulders. She looked at them and said that she didn't have kids because she and her husband didn't want them. She said that kids were too much work and that she loved her life too much to bring kids in it. My mom and I were like, "YES, GIRL, YESSSS!" It occurred to me that when people ask me if I have kids and I tell them I don't, I don't get that reaction at all; and it's because she was White and I am Black.

*When I walked away, I heard her say to herself "I thought all Black women had kids." Uh...no ma'am we don't!!!*

*--Chansler, age 9*

Why would anyone think that? This came from one of my elementary teachers who thought my favorite aunt had kids when I told her she didn't. One of the reasons she was my favorite aunt was because she didn't have kids! Having kids means raising them,

I don't want to do that! I like being a teacher because when the kids get on your nerves, you can give them back!

Amira Davis (2009), a Black woman and autoethnographer, had a hysterectomy performed due to medical reasons and has learned through her research that most women have hysterectomies because of medical issues. However, she learned that whenever African American women say that they got a hysterectomy, some people assume that it was done for nonlife-saving purposes. She claims that when a Caucasian women says she underwent a hysterectomy, it was because it was life-threatening and there was no other option; however, if it was an African American woman, there is no excuse and they did it because they wanted it (Davis, 2009). Some Black women, and women, don't have kids because they don't want to; that doesn't mean they're going to go out and get a hysterectomy!

My cousin has three children with different fathers who have nothing to do with her or them, and she's my age (twenty-five). She doesn't have a high school diploma, car, license, and uses the state to pay her bills. I went the other direction. I have a car, license, high school diploma, college degree, job in my field, and I am working on my Master's. After having her first child, my cousin could've chosen the same path I made (she still could), but she chose not to. I could've went in the same direction she went, but I chose not to. I am a woman and I choose not to have children. I am a Black woman and I choose not to have children.

I am a Black, female. I have one father that I share with my two brothers and one sister. My parents were married for a while before they decided to have my older brother. They were older than my friends' parents because they wanted stability before they

brought children into the world. We dressed nicely every day for school, we bathed every day, we had full bellies, we took a few vacations, we had health insurance, and parents drove nice cars. We were a force to be reckoned with. I had a great upbringing and although I know how to love a child and I know I would be a great mother, I choose not to have them. I had to be responsible for my little brother growing up and I hated every second of it! I had to clean up after my brothers sometimes, because they would blame me for it; I hate cleaning! I still call my mom to take care of me when I'm sick because I can't do it for myself! All of those things, I would have to do as a mother and I ain't got time for that! And that's my choice as a female. Not all women have kids and that's okay.

## VI. I'M A TEACHER AND I'M PROUD!

I love teaching! I've always wanted to do it because it's very rewarding to see a child using the skills that you have taught them! It just depends on what you teach them...

*I can't say things like "Go be in your feelings" because that's too Black. I can't roll my eyes at the kids because that's too Black. I can't roll my neck while I'm reading a story because that's too Black. That's who I am! The kids were going home saying and doing these things and I was being called "ghetto" and "disrespectful".*

*--Chansler, age 25*

I never went to school and told the kids to do those things at home; they just did them!

And what's wrong with them doing it?

At the private preschool that I teach at, I was dealing with parents that wanted me to be Black so they can tell all their friends how cultured they are because their child's teacher is Black, but they wanted me to act White. I am not a stay-at-home mom, rich White woman. I am a Black educator with feelings, and I act the way I want to act because that's who I am. According to an interview done by Shaddai Tembo (2020), she interviewed Black Early Childhood educators and concluded that although their Blackness matters, it is viewed negatively to parents within the school. I wasn't sure what they wanted me to be. I can only be who I am, not what others want me to be. This is something that we teach kids; why can't I practice what I preach?

## VII. WHY CAN'T I BE PROUD?

I thought that if I treat the kids like I was raised at home it would help them adjust to me better. My motivation that I told myself was, *That's what my parents did with me and I turned out just fine!* I am a well-educated, crime-free, and understanding Black woman. Mind you though, it was a Summer program with like twenty-seven kids, ages four and five, with two teachers one of which didn't have experience with kids (my assistant). I had to basically lead a classroom I wasn't really ready for, but I kept telling myself that this was a steppingstone for my Pre-K classroom coming up in the Fall. If I can get through this, then I could get through any type of classroom! It wasn't easy and there were bumps in the road, but overall, I thought I had it in the bag! Boy, was I wrong!

If I raised my voice at the students, they told their parents I yelled at them. If I told the parents that I wasn't aware that something happened, then that meant I'm not watching them. When I got COVID-19, I was told it was because I wasn't wearing my mask and in doing so, gave their child COVID-19. Let me give you the explanation to these assumptions:

1. Raising your voice and yelling are two different things. My mom yelled at me (she still does) and I listened. When having twenty-five to twenty-seven mixed aged kids in one class, you tend to get loud with them. However, I didn't know that these kids came from quiet households. They come from households where they are talked to in a calm manner and they explain each other's feelings; whereas in my household, we yell at each other on Christmas because we know we can. The Carter's have voices, and we use them!

2. I have twenty-five to twenty-seven kids to look after, not just one! If your child has a bump on their head and I asked them what happened and they say they don't know, and I write you a report stating, "I noticed a bump on their head and when I asked them what happened, they said they didn't know, so I iced it and they returned to play." Don't ask me any follow up questions, because I don't know! When I came home with a bump, scratch, or mark there was never an incident report. My mom or dad would ask and if I didn't know, that was the end of it. However, I have two other siblings in my household, I'm not an only child like these kids are. Out of the twenty-seven, only seven had siblings, and most of those are newborns. They aren't used to seeing their kids get hurt or having as many incident reports as I've written up. Besides, I noticed the bump, which meant I was watching them on some level, right?
  
3. I wear my mask everywhere that I go. We never really know who is vaccinated and who is not, and vaccinations are not cures. So, when I got COVID-19, the parents blamed me for their child getting it. Now, the mandate says that a child five and up should wear a mask, but my school doesn't require it. However, if the parents say they want their child to wear a mask, I require them to wear it. Out of twenty-seven, only one child wore a mask to school. I know I got COVID-19 from the students and my doctor thinks I got it from them too. All of my friends and family tested negative, but three students from the school tested positive. *You do the math!* My parents never blamed others for my siblings and I being sick. They understood that it happens when children are in school. I didn't know that some of these kids take vitamins to prevent things like that. I didn't know that

they expected me to keep the kids socially distanced from one another; I wouldn't have done that, had I'd known, anyways, but that's because my parents wouldn't have expected that either.

Being at this school made me realize that not all families are the same, especially White and Black ones. I didn't know my students home life because I didn't have the time to get to know them. Well, I didn't make time. Their parents hated me! They said I was the "mean", "ghetto", and "disrespectful" teacher. I knew I had to make a change, but I wasn't sure where to start. So, I went back in time to my handy-dandy undergrad notebooks to find some notes that I took during my Classroom Management class. I actually didn't find much for this particular situation, however, three words stood out to me: Culturally Responsive classroom.

What is a Culturally Responsive classroom? Richard Milner, Heather Cunningham, Lori Delale-O'Connor, and Erika Gold Kestenberg (2019), insist that teachers should think carefully and deliberately about what they are teaching and how they are teaching in a sociopolitical context. I was not thinking about these kids at all. I felt like getting to know them would just come naturally over time. However, there was twenty-seven of them; the time was now!

I wasn't sure what to do and my bosses were kind of indifferent about the situation. They wanted me to be myself, but they also wanted the parents to keep paying. I was torn too, because I wanted the kids to stay, but at what cost? I told myself that these parents had to see me beyond my Black skin and assumptions. "Education researchers have identified five important elements of culturally responsive education: (1) cultural literacy; (2) self-reflective analysis of one's beliefs; (3) caring; (4) trusting and inclusive

classrooms, respect for diversity; (5) a transformative curriculum” (Boutte, King, Johnson, and King, 2021, p. 82-83). I replaced some of the literature with books such as *A is for Activist* by Innosanto Nagara, *I Am Enough* by Grace Byers, and *I Like Myself* by Karen Beaumont. I had more, but those were the ones the kids liked the most. They explained that although we are all different, we all live in the same world and we can still love each other. I told them that although I do or say things differently than their parents, I still love and respect them (elements 1, 2, and 4).

Most of the students were White, upper-class kids. I am not any of that, nor was I raised that way. When I would raise my voice, the kids automatically assumed that I was yelling because no one had ever raised their voices at them. When I learned from their parents how they went about handling their child at home when they misbehaved (talking about feelings), I thought to myself, “There are twenty-five to twenty-seven kids in that room, I ain’t got time for that!!!” However, it did give me insight into how I can go about teaching them, so I can get to know them and have them open up to me. “Culturally responsive practices stress that teachers study their students and use their experiences as cultural data sets as they model instructional moves to maximize students’ opportunities to learn” (Milner, Cunningham, O’Connor, and Kestenberg, 2019, p. 24). I would study them as they misbehaved and I thought to myself, “*What would their parents do?*” Then I thought to myself, “*What I would I do?*” I never asked myself what my mother would do because the child would probably end up dead. Instead, I had to take my, and my mother’s, opinion out of the scenario and try it by their parent’s way. I would talk to them, but I would also be honest with them. When they would cry, sometimes their parents would tell them it’s okay. I would tell them that I understood how they felt; I used

to tell them that they would be okay, but I stopped saying that because I wanted to acknowledge their feelings and when you're four-years old, nothing seems to be okay. Don't get me wrong, there were times I wanted to raise my voice and the opportunity would always seem to present itself when I was in the mood, but these kids didn't know that life and I wasn't going to present that to them again. Once I started incorporating their parents' style of teaching, things got a lot better in my relationships with the kids.

You can ask any daycare and preschool teacher, we hate writing incident reports! You just never know how the parent will react. Some are annoyed as if it happens every day, when in reality it happens once a month, some want to know every detail such as who was the other child that was involved, and some (the parents I deal with) want to know where I was when the situation happened. *My* parents never cared if I got hurt in school; to them that meant I was having fun. When I broke my knee at school in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, it took my mom hours to come get me because she didn't think the nurse was serious (I am very loved by the way). However, I did notice that the room was basically a hazard zone. Bins of toys were in front of the exits, where I do my small group time is facing away from the centers, toys were never changed out (my fault), and chairs were everywhere! To reduce incident reports and upset parents, I had to make a change to the room. I told my assistant to come in early and we arranged the room to feel more comfortable. "...incorporate elements of students' home, personal, and community lives into the classroom" (Milner, Cunningham, O'Connor, and Kestenberg, 2019, p. 27). We brought in pillows, new toys, switched the position of my small group table so I was facing the kids, rearranged backpack hooks, tables, and we reduced the number of chairs. It looked a lot better and more comfortable. It felt like a home away from home. The kids

felt the same way because it wasn't loud and hectic, and I had fewer incident reports to write. Although the parents are not allowed in the building, the kids must have told them because it felt like home for them too.

The school I work at creates the centers for us. We put the toys out and show them how they are supposed to play with them with the instructions from the curriculum. *How are Centers supposed to be Centers when I have to show the students how to play with them?* “A student-centered approach in the classroom shifts the focus away from...where the teacher is the sole bearer of knowledge” (Milner, Cunningham, O'Connor, and Kestenberg, 2019, p. 27). I honestly didn't have time to sit with the kids and show them how to play, they should already know how to do that. However, I realized that some of the kids needed that kind of structure. At home, most of them told me that when they get home they played on their iPads or tablets until they ate or went to sleep. They didn't know how to play or play with others inside the room because they were used to a screen. Showing them how to play was the only way they knew how to play. iPads and tablets are good babysitters sometimes, but not with me. To create our culturally responsive classroom, I had to get rid of that. I would put the toys out and let the kids have at it. If they wanted to use their imagination, then they went for it. If they wanted to pretend that the chairs in the classroom were seats on an airplane, then be my guest. If they wanted to *not* play and be alone, then that's what they wanted to do; however, there was no screen time in the classroom, and eventually those kids started playing. I wasn't going to show them how to be creative, they already knew how to do that, they just needed someone to help them bring it out.

I also asked the curriculum coordinator if the kids and I can do something for Juneteenth, since it just became a holiday. They said that it was okay as long as they approved everything. Once it was approved, I allowed the kids to watch a kid-friendly, educational video about Rosa Parks. Some of the older kids knew who she was, but the younger ones didn't. The video showed her strength and courage she showed White people during a time Black people weren't supposed to be those things when addressing White people. I had to explain to them that there was a time where a lot of White people were very mean to Black people; they understood, but they were kind of sad at the way they treated Rosa Parks. The older kids ended up writing her letter thanking her for all that she had done for America and the younger kids gave her a card that said, "Thank You!" and with their handprint and name. Inside, the card had words they wrote to describe her that said "brave" and "strong" and "smart" (elements 2, 3, and 5). Over the course of a few weeks, the kids must have told their parents, because I didn't get anymore "ghetto" and "she's disrespectful" emails anymore, but I did notice the parents were making more small talk with me at pick up and drop off (guilt, maybe?).

At first, I didn't get to know their kids, but they didn't get to know me either. To them, I was "ghetto" and "mean" because I was loud and "yelling" at their kids. To them, I was "disrespectful" because I was writing incident reports and not knowing what happened. However, my assistant was White and doing the exact same things in the class. Why wasn't she being called all these things? I have a very strong feeling that all these words were thrown at me because I was Black, and she didn't get them, because she was White. The parents didn't expect me to change my way of going about things. I still code-mesh with kids and will continue to do so, and if the parents have a problem with it, then

they have a problem, but I don't! The parents needed to work with me, get to know me, and understand me before they start name-calling.

## VIII. I'M EVERYTHING AND I'M PROUD!

Life would be so boring if everyone was just one thing. If I was just a Black person, then I would only hang out with Black people. If I were only a woman, then I would be one of those feminist that hated men and brought up Feminism every 25 seconds. If I were just a teacher, I would probably have no life, correct everyone's grammar all the time, and constantly tell people around me to go potty (that's if they want to be around me). David Gillborn (2015) has a good way of viewing intersectionality. He says, "Intersectionality is a concept that enables us to recognize the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias" (Gillborn, 2015, p. 278). He provides examples of how men and women experience racism differently just as women of different races experience sexism differently (Gillborn, 2015). Although I am a Black woman, I experience racism differently than my Black brothers, and I experience sexism differently because I am a woman, and they are men. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), this problem typically arises in cases where statistics suggest significant disparities between Black and White workers and further disparities between Black men and Black women. Although I'm smarter than my older brother, he's a man and any job that he gets, he's paid more than women. However, as a Black man, he gets pulled over a lot and was once frisked while walking to the laundry mat in Houston; that's never happened to me.

I also learned from Nathaniel Bryan (2020) that Black boys are treated differently in schools than White boys when it comes to discipline. Early on when in school, there

was this tall Black boy in my class. We were only five-year-olds and he was already five feet tall and about 100 pounds. He was a nice guy, but the teachers were always getting upset with him and I never understood why. There was one time, when we were walking to the library, and my White teacher told him to walk in a straight line. He told her that he was (which he was) and she responded with, “No, you’re not! Walk straight!” She then yelled, “And pick up your pants!” I noticed that he wore baggy clothing and he said that most of his clothes belonged to his older brother; so it never really bothered him when teachers told him to pull his pants up. Apparently, she didn’t know that because after he picked up his pants, she yelled “And stop dragging your feet!” This time he sucked his teeth before picking his feet up, but unfortunately she heard that and told him, “Okay! When we get to the classroom you’re going to get a mark in your folder! I’m done!” He turned around and asked, “What did I do?” I wanted to know too because he did everything she asked. She said, “For disrespecting your teacher!” In our class, we would get marks in folders when we had a bad day and if we got too many, then we were excluded from certain activities. *Where was the disrespect???* Why wasn’t she getting on to the student that was on the other side of the hallway and NOT walking in a straight line with us? Why wasn’t she getting on to the kid with their hood on in the building? Why did she just pick on him when there were other suitable candidates to pick on? It’s because he was Black, and they were White.

## IX. SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

*“Some people say we’ve got a lot of malice, some say it’s a lot of nerve...”*

*--James Brown, 1968*

My friend’s father from the introduction of this thesis made assumptions about me and my family, because I was Black. He assumed my brothers and I had different fathers because we were Black. He assumed my father didn’t work or my mother didn’t work and just let the state pay our way of living, because we were Black. He assumed my parents weren’t married or they had recently gotten married after having us, because we were Black. He put me in one box and this entire academic paper proves that I am more than that.

*“But I say we won’t quit moving until we get what we deserve...”*

*--James Brown, 1968*

Yes, I am Black. I was taught Black is beautiful! It’s a rich, melanin color with so much history behind it! I am a female! Females are warriors that can answer a phone, go to war, start fires and burn them down with babies on their hips all at the same time! I am someone’s daughter and sister! I was raised to be respectful and poised around everyone, especially White people. When he disrespected me with those questions, he disrespected my family. I bet he would never ask those questions to my father or my mother! I am a teacher! We are important and, thanks to the pandemic, we are essential! We teach, take care of, and are with other people’s kids all day. If that doesn’t show you how dedicated someone is, then what does?

*“We have been ‘buked and we have been scorned...”*

*--James Brown, 1968*

The questions that my friend’s father had asked me were hurtful, I just didn’t know it at the time. I wish I would’ve at least asked him why he was asking me all of those questions. Instead, I just answered them and silenced myself when the questions got too confusing for me. However, because of that experience I thought I had built a wall of steel for comments like that. I didn’t think anyone could hurt me like that, until I became the “mean”, “ghetto”, “disrespectful” and “irresponsible” teacher. I thought I was doing everything right, and then those words were thrown in my face. At least my friend’s father tried to hide it by asking me racially charged questions. These parents did it by point-blank just calling me out and not my White assistant.

*“We’ve been treated bad, talked about as sure as you’re born...”*

*--James Brown, 1968*

Not everyone knows how important someone’s identity is. Everything that I have mentioned is very important, because it proves how all of those things are makings of me. There is also an intersectionality between all of these things: between how I was raised as a Black female to now as a Black educator. Being Black and a female meant I had to be better than my White counterparts, and it’s still not enough. I wish the parents of the kids that I teach could just go inside my head and see what and how I think, just to get the courage to academically talk to them. I can’t be anyone else but me, and I don’t want to be anyone else but me.

*“But just as sure as it takes two eyes to make a pair...”*

--James Brown, 1968

I would love it if people would stop making assumptions about me based on my skin color or the way I talk. I would love it if people could ask me, without belittling me, about who I am or where I'm from. Yes, I am Black, but so much more. Just like other people are White and so much more, or Hispanic and so much more, or Asian and so much more. I am not Michael Jackson, I am not going to change the color of my skin to make others more comfortable around me. I'm not as academic as Barack Obama, I won't change how I talk just so you can understand some of the phrases that your child is saying (they are old enough for you to ask them). When someone looks at me, they *can* see more.

*"...Ha, brother we can't quit until we get our share."*

--James Brown, 1968

I went to college, got my degree, and have been in many classrooms over the four years I have been teaching. In the four years I have been teaching in Early Childhood, I have come across all different kinds of students with different backgrounds. I've learned that you can't treat them how you were raised, but you can learn how to teach them. That's what I love about Early Childhood, you have all the time in the world to get to know them and that's how you teach them. You learn from them and then they learn from you.

I am also not a quitter. When I was marginalized by my students' parents, I fixed things. I understood that they're background is different from mine, but I didn't understand their parenting practices, because I was parented another way. However, I

was raised by two people who came from nothing and made themselves into something. Lowe and Dotterer (2013) say that parenting practices are best understood within the socialized domain. I was not in their domain at all! However, in order to teach these kids, I had to understand them. Once I did, things got a lot smoother. I'm very happy that I got to know the parents, and that some of the parents reached out to get to know me. Once I showed them that I'm more than the words that they threw at me, they did more parent-teacher conferences with me, reached out through direct messaging, or would wait to pick-up their child just so they could talk to me as I walked to my car. I bet they told themselves that I was more than just a Black person, female, or their child's teacher. I was all of those things that I deserved to be respected, just I as always showed them and their kids respect.

*"Say it loud: ..."*

*--James Brown, 1968*

The answer to my first research question is, they want me be to Black, but act White in the classroom. Sorry White parents, I'm just not going to do that! If I have to act White, then that's all it is...an ACT! I put on a good performance of acting White for the first eighteen years in my life, and it got me nowhere with either race; and my identity was shot! I'm being myself in the classroom and that's what I told the parents. They know I'm professional, but firm with their kids. They know I'm Black, but I'm also a teacher and should be seen with the utmost respect. I respect their children's skin color, speech, and background. I expect the children and parents to be themselves around me and in the classroom, so that's exactly what I do.

*“...I’m Black and I’m proud!”*

*--James Brown, 1968*

To answer the second question, I have to change the way I teach for my White students. I learned that treating the kids the way I was treated was not the route to take. “...The Ecologies of Parent Engagement model [EPE] (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004) offers a framework that goes beyond the cultural context of parent engagement. It includes the beliefs and actions of everyday social behavior, or practices of parent engagement. “These beliefs and actions were believed to influence the decisions of what and why parents do what they do...” (Barton et al., 2004, p. 3). My parents were Black and raised me like they were trying to get *me* out of the projects, because that’s all they knew. The parents I was dealing with were raising their children as people who will always hear the word “yes” and are always right, because that’s all they knew. I can’t change the way someone is raising their child, but I can change the way I teach them and that started with getting to know them. Once I got to know them and changed the dynamic of the classroom, teaching did get easier.

## X. CONCLUSION

I teach my kids that hitting, scratching, slapping, and biting are all things that could hurt people, but I also teach them that words can too. I tell them that even if they think those words wouldn't hurt, they should think about what they say because it could. "Microinsults are unintentional rude and insensitive verbal and nonverbal communications that demean someone's racial heritage or identity. A Black student being asked by a White student, 'How did you make it into a gifted program?' would be an example. The perpetrator of this form of microaggression is typically unaware of the negative implications of such a statement, but it is clearly understood as such by the recipient" (Henfield, 2011, p. 142). My students are capable of microinsults at their age. My friend's father was throwing microinsults at me as a child and it wasn't until I talked to my older brother that I realized how much they hurt me.

In case you were wondering what happened to that friendship, I did cut her off, because I couldn't go to her house without avoiding her father. I knew her father wouldn't let her come to my house, and I can't change the color of my skin and where I come from. The color of my skin is just the surface of me, and he didn't or couldn't see past that. The Pre-K parents couldn't see past my skin color and made the wrong assumptions too. The children did see past it, but couldn't learn from me, because I couldn't see past them. We all had to work together to educate these kids, and it started with understanding who we all were inside and out.

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