Good Trouble, Necessary Trouble: A Call to Create Identity Affirming Spaces for Black Youth to Grow As Agents of Change in Early Childhood and Elementary School Classrooms

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Abstract

In their early years, youth begin to notice race, develop attitudes related to race, form their own racial identity, and make decisions based on race. Adults can play a critical role in teaching about and affirming Black children's developing identities. As educators passionate about the success and wellbeing of Black children, we envision spaces where energy is divested from surveilling, suspending, and expelling Black children and energy is invested in working to address educational injustices, particularly through the cultivation of identity affirming spaces for Black youth to grow as agents of change. In this paper, we share how the first author worked virtually with elementary and middle school students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students in the class read complex texts, asked and answered questioned, and used information gained from the text as well as their lived experiences to better understand and confront injustices in order to imagine future possibilities for Black youth in and outside the classroom. We conclude with a discussion of the possibilities of cultivating identity affirming spaces in early childhood and elementary school classrooms. With young activists at the center, we can dream up spaces where activism is encouraged, sociopolitical identities are formed, and "good trouble, necessary trouble" becomes the foundation for systems-level change.

>*During the summer of 2020, eight-year-old Nolan Davis saw the video of the murder of George Floyd and ensuing demonstrations on television and was worried that people who looked like him would continue to be hurt. He asked his mother if he could create his own march so kids like him could have their voices heard. Over 700 individuals came to the Children's Black Lives Matter March organized by Nolan and his mother. Attendees wrote messages with chalk on the ground, shared their experiences via megaphone, and marched in support of Black lives. When asked about the impact of the event, Nolan said he hoped the march would encourage other children to organize their own events.* (Lee, 2020)

There is a popular adage that all you ever needed to know, you learned in kindergarten. Adults often reminisce about learning to share, play fairly, take naps, and, of course, live by the golden rule to treat others how you want to be treated (e.g., Fulghum, 1986). During early childhood and elementary school, however, Black children may already experience inequitable treatment when they enter educational spaces as a result of living in a racialized society (Swanson et. al., 2009; White & Wanless, 2019). In the early years, youth begin to notice race, develop attitudes related to race, form their own racial identity, and make decisions based on race (Quintana & McKown, 2008; White & Wanless, 2019). This process occurs at the backdrop of societal influences (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Young children develop racial stereotypes and prejudices around 3-5 years old (see Farago, Davidson & Byrd or Cristol & Gimbert, 2008 for reviews of racial identity and ethnic racial socialization) and developmental psychologist Gloria Boutte argues, "[Black] children can read and understand the world and can read care and love or the absence of it in their classroom relationships. These are skills that I think many Black kids have. Because of this, there is a huge need for healing" (Gardner, Braden & Yoon, 2020). Adults can play a critical role in teaching about and affirming Black children's developing identities. Nolan's efforts to become a change agent over the summer in support of Black Lives Matter with support from his mother, for example,

demonstrates how young children can organize and engage in what the late John Lewis called "good trouble," "necessary trouble" that "redeem[s] the soul of America" (Lewis, 2020). What happens, though, when students like Nolan enter the classroom? Will his passion for social justice be met with resistance or continued cultivation as he learns about the power of his voice? Will teachers watch him and anticipate problems or see problem-solving behaviors?

Research shows how Black students are often met with policing or punishment for expressing themselves in developmentally appropriate ways (e.g., Gilliam, 2005; U.S Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Moreover, Black student activism is often met with pushback or backlash. In Troublemakers (2017), Carla Shalaby notes how fearlessness and courage in such instances are often mischaracterized as "impulsivity" or behavior problems. In Devlin's (2018) study of Black girls who desegregated schools, Devlin wrote about Tessie Prevost-Williams and Leona Tate, two third graders who integrated T.J. Semmes Elementary School in New Orleans. Despite their only being 8-years old, people were physically violent towards them—simply for being at school and fighting for their rights.

Today, this physical, psychological, and emotional violence continues through harsh disciplinary practices and policies. Suspensions and expulsions occur at high rates for Black children in early childhood and elementary settings (Gilliam, 2005; U.S Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). In preschool, for example, Black public preschool children were 3.6 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as White preschool children, representing 19% of preschool enrollment but 47% of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. In K-12 education, the disparities persist, with Black students being 3.8 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions.

As educators passionate about the success and wellbeing of Black children, we envision spaces where energy is divested from surveilling, suspending, and expelling Black children, and energy is invested in working to address educational injustices, particularly

through the cultivation of identity affirming spaces for Black youth to grow as agents of change. In this paper, we share how the first author worked virtually with elementary and middle school students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students in the class read complex texts, asked and answered questioned, and used information gained from the text as well as their lived experiences to better understand and confront injustices in order to imagine future possibilities for Black youth in and outside the classroom. In the sections that follow, we discuss theoretical and conceptual underpinnings that inform our work and provide an example lesson to illustrate how classrooms can invest in students and divest in surveillance and policing. We conclude with a discussion of the possibilities of cultivating identity affirming spaces in early childhood and elementary school classrooms.

Examining the Surveillance, Suspension and Expulsion of Black Youth

The Black-White discipline[1] gap has been well established over the past two decades in empirical research at the national, state, and district levels (e.g., U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018; U.S. Office for Civil Rights [OCR]; 2016) and bears significance for early childhood and elementary classrooms (i.e., preschool through grade six). While the OCR does not collect data on daily out-of-class referrals (i.e., instances where students are sent out of the classroom to a central office or behavior space), 2.8 million K-12 students received one or more out-of-school suspensions in the 2013-2014 school year (OCR, 2016). This included approximately 1.1 million Black students (OCR, 2016).

1. Throughout this paper, the term "discipline" refers to exclusionary action taken by an educator that removes a child from their regular school programming for disciplinary purposes (U.S. Office for Civil Rights, 2016). The term "in school suspension" (ISS) is an instance in which a student spends the school day in a designated location inside the school and receives educational services. The term "out of school suspension" (OSS) is an instance in which a child is temporarily removed from their school to another setting (e.g., home, behavior center) and receives no educational services. Expulsion is the removal of a child from school without educational services for a school year or longer (U.S. Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

In early childhood, researchers have coined the phrases to describe the preschool disci¬pline gap "preschool pushout" and the "preschool to prison pipeline" (Morris, 2016; School Readiness Consulting, 2017; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Among preschool aged children, Black students represented 18% of the total preschool enrollment, yet comprise 48% of the children who receive more than one out-of-school suspension (OCR, 2014) for minor disruptions including bathroom accidents and taking off shoes while crying (George, 2012). Notably, preschoolers are expelled three times more than their K-12 counterparts (Gilliam, 2005).

At the intersection of discipline and policing lies school-related referrals to law enforcement, which could include any report to a law enforcement agency, including school police and resource officers, for incidents that occur at school, during school events, or while taking school transportation (OCR, 2016). Referrals can also result in arrest for students. In the 2015-2016 school year, Black students represented 31% of school-related arrests (OCR, 2016) with more arrests happening in urban schools with active police presence on campus (Lindsay, 2018; OCR, 2016). Black and Hispanic students with disabilities are also more likely to be restrained than other students (CRDC, 2010). Once the referral is made to law enforcement, school discipline becomes deeply intertwined with criminal justice.

Like the cell phone video of George Floyd's arrest, some students' disciplinary experiences have been documented and posted on the internet. Videos showing Black youth being ripped from their chairs (Fausett & Southall, 2015), pinned down by a school resource officer, or handcuffed at a young age (Flores, 2020) illustrate how school discipline can traumatize and/or re-traumatize students (Dutil, 2020). Disciplinary experiences can evoke feelings of fear or lack of control, or lead to other disruptive feelings that have long-lasting negative effects (APA, 2020).

Educators and School Discipline

For Black youth, teacher relationships relative to other social components are particularly meaningful in addressing the discipline

gap (Bottiani et. al, 2016; Decker et. al., 2007; Meehan, Hughes & Cavell, 2003). Okonofua et al. (2016) describe a "toxic social-psychological dynamic" that occurs between students and teachers that leads to disciplinary action. According to Okonofua and colleagues (2016), teachers enter the field with the goal of teaching and inspiring students. If a student "disrupts" the class, the teacher may interpret the misbehavior as a threat to that goal. In response to feeling like they are being prevented from teaching coupled with pervasive racial stereotypes (e.g., Black students are troublemakers) and expectations rooted in Whiteness (Shalaby, 2017), teachers punish Black students more harshly to curb future "troublemaking."

From the student perspective, in alignment with racial-identity-development theories, students may already mistrust teachers and be aware that their teachers can be biased. As a result, they may disengage from the relationship with the teacher or be less cooperative. Therefore, once disciplined, the student's perceptions are supported and the teacher-student relationship continues to deteriorate. Future incidents of discipline may increase and escalate in response and students may exhibit heightened distress, distrust, and alienation. A loss of trust and disengagement is a reasonable adaptation to a pattern of institutional distrust, but it can lead to accumulating behavioral consequences over time as well as an accelerated loss of trust.

Identity Affirming Spaces for Black Youth

Scholars have argued that a different paradigm is needed to meet the academic needs of Black students in public schools. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 1975; 2002) are the two most cited theories that address the academic needs of diverse students (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Gloria Ladson-Billings presented the theory of *culturally relevant pedagogy* as a model for improved practice by developing a grounded theory of teaching African American students and other students who are underserved in

public schools based on her research of eight exemplary teachers of African American students, Gloria Ladson-Billings developed the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy as a model for improved practice (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995). Ladson-Billings defined culturally relevant pedagogy as "a pedagogy of opposition…committed to collective, not merely individual empowerment (1995, p.60)." She wrote that culturally relevant pedagogy:

> rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (1995, p.60)

The academic success criterion proposes that teachers must demand and produce academic excellence of their students. The cultural competence criterion proposes that teachers must utilize student's culture as a vehicle for learning by bridging the disconnect between home and school, involving parents in the classroom, and allowing students to use their "home language." The critical consciousness criterion proposes that teachers must develop student's sociopolitical consciousness in order to encourage students to question the status quo and become active citizens in society (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Geneva Gay's concept of *culturally responsive teaching* is similar to Ladson-Billings' definition of culturally relevant pedagogy, but Gay identifies teaching practices as her central focus (Gay, 1975; 2010). Gay defines culturally relevant teaching as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Gay argues that culturally responsive teaching hinges on:

> seeing cultural differences as assets; creating caring learning communities where culturally different individuals and heritages are valued; using cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide

> curriculum development, classroom climates, instructional strategies, and relationships with students; challenging racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance, injustice, and oppression; being change agents for social justice and academic equity; mediating power imbalances in classrooms based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class; and accepting cultural responsiveness as endemic to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups. (p. 31)

Based on 2020 Google analytics, Ladson-Billing's (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy and Gay's theory of culturally responsive teaching (2002) have been cited in over 19,000 publications, combined. In reflecting on the history of culturally relevant pedagogy and its (mis)use, Ladson-Billings writes "...Even when people have demonstrated a more expansive knowledge of culture, few have taken up the sociopolitical dimensions of this work, instead dulling its critical edge or omitting it all together." She reflects on her visits to classrooms that have worked to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy, writing,

> ...they rarely pushed students to consider critical perspectives on policies and practices that may have an impact on their lives and communities. There was no discussion of issues such as school choice, school closings, rising incarceration rates, gun laws, or even everyday school climate questions like whether students should wear uniforms (which typically sparks spirited debate) (p. 78).

Recently, scholars such as Paris & Alim (2014) and Love (2019) have extended the work of Ladson-Billings and Gay to ensure that Black students are consistently supported in school. Paris & Alim (2014) developed the theory of culturally sustaining pedagogy and Love (2019) calls for abolitionist teaching. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014) explicitly calls for schools to sustain, rather than eradicate, the linguistic, literate, and cultural ways of being among

youth of color. In alignment with this, the concept of abolitionist teaching imagined and operationalized by Dr. Bettina Love is rooted in the internal desire for freedom, joy, restorative justice, and mattering (Love, 2019). Love argues that no type of pedagogy, however effective, can single-handedly remove systemic barriers to equitable education (Love, 2019) but that antiracist pedagogy combined with grassroots organizing can prepare students to "demand the impossible" (p. 19). For educators, demanding the impossible, she says, could mean refusing to take part in zero-tolerance policies, insisting that children play, calling out racist teachers, dismantling the standardized testing machine, and affirming the humanity of all students (Love, 2019). We argue that it could also mean creating safe spaces for Black students where activism is encouraged, sociopolitical identities are formed, and joy is cultivated.

Another aspect of both Abolitionist Teaching and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy is the notion of asset-based pedagogical approaches to foster a pluralistic present and future (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 90) for students. Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model provides a framework through which educators can draw on and utilize existing resources from children and their communities. By amplifying the six types of cultural capital (aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance) (Yosso, 2005), educators can understand and empower students beyond White narratives (Love, 2019) while centering on the practices of students of color to further cultural and racial justice (Paris & Alim, 2014). Resistance capital, the experience of securing equal rights and collective freedom, holds particular weight here as we look to nurture activism in our youngest students, many of whom are being influenced by parents, community members, and historical and generational legacies of social justice activism.

The Importance of Divesting from Discipline

Bernice King (2020), the daughter of Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King Jr., urges activists to "divest your energy from imagining the worst and invest your energy in committing to and

working for better...to strategizing and organizing for justice." We respond to the call by moving from focusing on what's wrong and moving towards imagining what is possible through research, pedagogy, and practice that focuses on addressing the needs of Black youth.

We explore the question: How do we transform students' relationships with their teachers from a toxic to a virtuous social-ecological cycle, where educators are "invested in committing to and working better?"

As school buildings closed as a result of COVID-19 and scholars worried about "learning loss," we began to think about the importance of crafting identity affirming spaces for Black youth in the midst of two pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism. The example that follows highlights activities that took place during a virtual summer (2020) class developed by the first author as part of a larger virtual leadership academy for Black girls. The course, *Black Girl Power Hour!*, met once a week for six weeks. Every student was provided with the resources (e.g., laptops, workbooks, writing materials) needed to strategize and organize for justice.

Power to the People during the Pandemic

"See us. Respect us. Know that BLACK GIRLS MATTER."
                    —students in a group poetry writing activity

Each session began by inviting students to independently complete a five-minute social and emotional learning activity while listening to songs written and sung by Black women artists. This was used as the opening activity because a recent study found that adults view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their White peers, and perceived Black girls as needing less nurturing, less comforting, and less protection (Epstein et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to provide spaces for Black girls to speak openly and honestly about their emotions during the pandemics. Engaging models of teaching that include Black and Brown girls as active participants in the learning process, "give girls a chance to center their experiences, tell stories,

dance, sing, write, meditate, and play their knowledge into a curriculum that recognizes and values these expressions as commensurate with the other 'data' they will learn in school" (Morris, 2019; p. 127). Some social and emotional learning activities during the virtual sessions included writing gratitude lists, setting goals, drawing self-portraits, writing everything that comes to mind for five minutes, and talking about a recent news article.

After the girls completed each activity independently, they were invited to share with each other. The girls led the conversation, discussing their thoughts and emotions about topics such as how their family was affected by COVID-19, their experiences marching in local demonstrations as Black girls, how much they missed school-based activities like playing sports, or how frustrating it can be talking to their White classmates about race (and racism). The girls also shared their anxieties about attending school virtually and in person during the pandemic. During one activity in particular, students described helpful and harmful school policies and practices, and designed new ones that centered the needs of Black youth (e.g., abolishing dress codes that disproportionately punish Black girls and expanding the school library to include more books featuring Black protagonists). Black youth are sources and resources of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and by letting them drive the conversation about contemporary issues, they provided suggestions and acted as change agents (Gay, 2010). For the first author, the students' responses became an opportunity to validate and affirm girls' experiences, as well as add to or modify the existing curriculum.

Utilizing Writings by Black Women and Girls as Mentor Texts

After sharing, the group shifted to focusing on a version of com¬munal read-alouds (Toliver, 2020). They read and annotated works by and about Black women and girls. The first lesson introduced the concepts of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). Once the girls understood the concepts, a student read the poem aloud then the girls independently annotated the focal piece by drawing cartoon eyes by sentences that "mirrored" their

experiences, exclamation points by sentences that were "windows" to experiences that were different from their own, question marks by words or sentences that were new or confusing, and hearts by sentences that provided them with the ability to use a "sliding glass door" to step into someone else's experiences. After, the girls shared their annotations, noting places where their annotations were similar or different, and helped each other learn new or unfamiliar terms. In the process, the girls often asked questions or shared relevant personal stories. When the content of the writing was unfamiliar, YouTube videos were used to clarify an unfamiliar event or term. Through the process, the girls learned more about and discussed concepts such as school desegregation and intersectionality, as well as about sentence type and purpose.

Engaging Black Girls in Creative Writing

Next, the girls used the read-aloud as a mentor text, writing that helps them contextualize and better understand their experiences (Newman & Fink, 2012), to individually and collectively write about the pandemic and Black girlhood. At first, the girls were apprehensive about writing their own pieces. Many worried it would be too difficult or that they did not have a firm grasp on the sentence structure the author used. This served as an important moment to remind them of their Black girl power. Brown (2013) argued that when Black girls examine their lived experiences, they come up with radically unique ideas about those experiences. Their first collective piece, *power to the people during the pandemic*, was based on a poem titled "power to the people" in Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson (2016) And written collectively by the girls as an exercise in sharing their experiences to create art.

power to the people during the pandemic.

A poem created by 22 Black girls on July 7, 2020

On the television screen

We hear

   8 minutes and 46 seconds of breathing

We hear

    chants from people of all races that BLACK LIVES MATTER

We hear

    reminders to vote in the next election

We see

    BLACK LIVES MATTER murals being created

    then erased

    created

        then erased?

We feel real…

    suspicious

    awkward

    frustrated

    sad

    …but sometimes inspired

Because people are rising

    people are connecting

        and marching

        and starting businesses

WE are buying Black

    and speaking truth

    signing petitions

        and unfollowing

Because

Black lives do matter.

Our skin tone is not a threat.

We are not "criminals."

We want you to unlearn your racism

See us.

Respect us.

Know that BLACK GIRLS MATTER.

Abolitionist teaching requires the incorporation of art because art is "how dark children make sense of this unjust world and a way to sustain who they are, as they recall and (re)member in the midst of chaos what it means to thrive" (Love, 2019, p. 100). After each learning exercise, students discussed how they could make "good trouble" and be change agents in their communities. As the weeks progressed, the girls were encouraged to carve out space outside of class to write and refine their creative pieces. At the conclusion of one class, one girl exclaimed that "we are writing history." Art is a way for Black girls to not only express their emotions, but to re-write their identities by telling their own stories and experiences to the world (Brown, 2013; Muhammad, 2012; Evans-Winters, 2017).

A Call to Cultivate Identity Affirming Spaces for Black Youth in Early Childhood and Elementary School Classrooms

In Freedom Dreams, Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) asks, "How do we transcend bitterness and cynicism and embrace love, hope, and an all-encompassing dream of freedom, especially in these rough times" and urges us to look to young people for the answers. He asks, "What are today's young activists dreaming about? We know what they are fighting against, but what are they fighting for?" Since the early twentieth century, Black youth have been instrumental in leading civil rights and activist movements and fighting for justice (e.g., Devlin, 2018; Mims & Kaler-Jones, 2020). The NAACP Youth Council in the 1930s and 1940s, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s and 70s, the Black Student Leadership Network in the 1980s, the Black Lives Matter movement of the current moment, including 8-year-old Nolan Davis' Children's Black Lives Matter March

and the work of the Black girls enrolled in Black Girl Power Hour!, all illustrate powerful movements that were constructed and led by Black youth (Franklin, 2016). Black children have always engaged in freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2002), despite the threat of violence and ridicule. What if, instead of investing in discipline, we followed Black children's lead to radically reimagine and invest in schooling spaces as liberatory sites, where students can not only see themselves and their ancestors' contributions, but feel loved and affirmed? What if school spaces fuel students' activism and good trouble?

In foregrounding the sociopolitical dimensions of culturally responsive practices, Black Girl Power Hour! is an example of what could be possible in classrooms across the United States. The process of intentionally making space for Black youth to 1) discuss what is happening in their lives, surrounding communities, and the world; 2) read (and create) texts that provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors; 3) express themselves through art; and 4) dream up new programs, policies, and practices, can be integrated into every classroom beginning in early childhood and elementary classrooms. Early childhood and elementary educators can engage in communal read-alouds with picture books featuring a Black protagonist. For instance, Essien and Wood (2020) found that Black girls' hair was perceived as less than by their peers and teachers in early childhood. In response to this common Black early childhood experience, educators can engage in communal read-alouds with books that specifically address hair. Books such as *Not Quite Snow White* by Ashley Franklin, *Hair Love* by Matthew Cherry, or *I Am Enough* by Grace Byers. Educators can also read-aloud books. Books such as *All Because You Matter* by Tami Charles, *Your Name is a Song* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow, *I Am Every Good Thing* by Derrick Barnes, and *Who Will You Be?* by Andrea Pippins, that affirm Black children's developing racial identities, more generally.

In addition to asking questions about what happened in the story, young children can use their funds of knowledge to share what they already know about the topics described in the text, make

predictions about what they think will happen next, and discuss how educators and peers can best support the protagonist. Through the process, youth can discuss how the storyline relates to their own experiences. After, students can engage in the process of freedom dreaming by creating or viewing art (e.g., protest signs, chalk art, storybooks, songs, pictures) about "what they are fighting for" related to the text. Through the process, educators can encourage youth to challenge the status quo to make good trouble.

However, we cannot only seek to incorporate culturally relevant and responsive curriculum and pedagogical practices; we must also commit to refusing and dismantling harsh and destructive discipline policies by passing school discipline legislation that explicitly limits and eventually eliminates the use of suspensions and expulsions, expands access to mental health services, and ensures that Black children have access to affordable, high-quality early education (see Fischer & Weyer, 2019; Johnson-Staub, 2017; White House, 2016 for additional policy recommendations). Moreover, teacher education must equip educators with the resources, tools, and skills to disrupt harmful stereotypes and prejudices and support students' positive racial identities.

A Concluding Thought

We can and should play a significant role in creating and sustaining classroom spaces that encourage critical inquiry, center student voices, and inspire activism. We must be creative in our pedagogy to inspire arts-based practices, imagination, and storytelling to dream a new world into existence—one free of harm. We must affirm students' identities and help them recognize their power to write and make history. We must demand that students be seen through an asset lens, drawing on their existing funds of knowledge and cultural wealth, while also pushing back against violent distortions of Black youth to dismantle punitive systems and policies. We charge educators to divest from policing and invest in schools rooted in equity, justice, and liberation. With young activists at the center, we can dream up spaces where activism is encouraged, sociopolitical

identities are formed, and "good trouble, necessary trouble" becomes the foundation for systems-level change.

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