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Overrepresentation of African American Children in Child Welfare

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GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in Social Innovation

School of Community Leadership and Development

# 1. Introduction

African American children continue to be overrepresented in the child welfare system. This study will show how existing research illustrates how the systems are used to put many Black families and youth into the sights of the school-to-prison pipeline via this intervention. This specific issue is rooted in systemic and historical racism. The literature has revealed this and continues to show how teachers as mandated reporters play a role in shaping the outcome through how they perceive Black children to be subjected to abuse or neglect. In data retrieved from the National Center for Juvenile Justice on Disproportionality Rates for Children of Color in Foster Care (2022) show that from the years 2010-2020, African American children were significantly above the disproportionality Index in comparison to White, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American children who remained either on target or below the disproportionality index for all years reflected. Legal scholar Jane Brennan's (2020) shows how “there is little protection against malicious reporting, even though removal of a child from his or her home, and family, is a traumatic experience for children, parents and the family unit” (pg. 124). Brennan’s research speaks to systemic issues that continue to stem from the early evolution of child protection as a mechanism of social control. American sociologist Joe Feagin defined systemic racism as “the racist ideology, attitudes, emotions, habits, actions, and institutions of whites in this society. It is a material, social, and ideological reality that is well-imbedded in major U.S. institutions” (Feagin, pg. 2).

A deeper study of systemic racism theory shows that intergenerational transmission of unjust enrichment for White Americans, intentional or not, leads to intergenerational unjust impoverishment of African Americans. Social institutions play a large role in perpetuating this inequity. The child welfare system is one of many institutional frameworks that has been shaped

and distorted by systemic racism. Although many policies and procedures exist to adequately apply methods aligned with child protection law, there needs to be an emphasis placed on training to help reduce biases. Anti-Bias, anti-racism, and cultural sensitivity training should be a continuous effort. In addition, the evidence suggests a need for better training in place for mandated reporters; helping them to identify cultural differences when working with diverse populations, regarding what is assessed for potential child protection involvement.

## **2. Research Question**

How can cross-cultural training improve interactions between mandated reporters (teachers) and Black children to mitigate the overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system?

### **Aims**

- To show how this specific issue is rooted in historical and systemic racism.
- To show how Teachers as mandated reporters play a role in shaping the outcome through how they perceive Black children to be subjected to abuse or neglect.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **Targeting Families with Systemic Racism**

Child welfare common practices and how case workers have handled families continue to cause questions whether or not biases are at the forefront of discretionary practices. Data from 2020 gathered by the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) shows that U.S. Black children are disproportionately overrepresented in 42 states. In Michigan alone, AFCARS data also reveal that from the years of 2010-2020 Black children “in foster care” were twice above the disproportionality index, whereas white children fell below the index in all

years represented. Roberts (2014) argues that disproportionality rates are caused by biased practices within child welfare. Many of the policies surrounding child welfare were written with racist language, due to power structures and white superiority at its core. Roberts (2014) further emphasized bias in strength-based assessments, bias in decision making, racial poverty impacting maltreatment of Black children, and the belief that “African American children are better off away from their families and communities was seen in explicit statements by key policymakers and service providers” (pg. 428). Roberts emphasize how policy is written but also a heavy emphasis on how it is being applied regarding African American children, their families, and who is afforded access.

Thomas et al (2022) argue that bias and risk models reveal how individual-level factors contribute to racial inequities in child welfare. Black families are at a greater risk of exposure to risk factors such as “poor physical health, depression, and criminal justice involvement” (pg. 2-3). This risk is much higher than that of white children due to systemic racism resulting in social determinants such as racialized poverty. This is one aspect of systemic racism explaining a substantial portion of the inequitable exposure of Black children to [CPS] contact; a finding that is broadly consistent with prior research suggesting a difference in systemic risk by race.”

Some systems do intersect and there is a connection within institutions as agents that aid in the overrepresentation of Black children and families in child welfare. Roberts (2012) argues that there is intersectionality with both the foster care system and the U.S. prison system working together as agents, keeping women of color at a disadvantage. Her findings reveal that women from marginalized communities are blamed for their socioeconomic status while overlooking problems created by systemic oppression. Roberts concludes by stating how increased monitoring of women of color, through foster and prison systems aids in the continuation of

systemic issues maintaining power structures in society. Jane Brennan (2020) further affirms this ideology in her studies on how bias can create the perception that Black and brown families are not good parents to why child protection developed the idea of saving the child by removing them.

### **Interactions with Black Families**

There are continued historical perceptions on how one should interact with Black families. Font et al (2012) discuss the differences between how caseworkers deal with families, differential treatment, and outcomes based on race, specifically Black and white families. When rating families and doing risk assessments, Black families are typically rated as being more “at risk” than white families. Graham (2004) suggests some policies have been put in place that have failed to address the inequalities and other forms of institutionalized racism, that continue to contribute to the overrepresentation of African Americans in social welfare. This further confirms how “social and historical constructs of race have created institutional barriers between individual and family wellbeing and the instruments of government (Graham, 2004, pg. 49). The lack of representation of Black people among social workers impacts social welfare practices where we continue to see areas of disproportionality. Black people across the globe are the last exhausted option considered, and their quality of life will only come from acts of empowerment because if it was dependent upon the system there would be no quality in it at all. Cox et al (2022) describe the ideal of “institutional racism” where marginalized groups are inadvertently impacted by discriminatory practices. This also allowed for those with power to advance while people of color faced inequitable outcomes. Subsequently, it remains with question who has “differential access to power and privilege” and how can procedural injustices strengthen distributive injustice?

## **Antiracism and Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

One of the challenges we face is understanding why Critical Race Theory is much needed in teaching methods and its curriculum. Ibram X. Kendi (2022) in his illustrations of *How to Raise an Antiracist* defined a person with racist empathy as “someone who exudes concern, takes the perspectives, or feels personally distressed for the racial group on the higher end of racial disparity and injustice, but not people of lesser status” (pg. 74). This occurs in a society that has been conditioned to act based on western philosophy, or under conditions where those who have been oppressed have learned to prioritize the feelings of our oppressors. “When elected officials’ dog-whistle to White parents that CRT is harming White children, they are relying on a deep well of racist empathy to make it pay off” (Kendi, 2022, pg. 74). Kendi (2022) also discusses how to control racist empathy by utilizing antiracist empathy; where we begin to empathize with those who are on the disproportionately disadvantaged and being more responsive from that perception. Until this stance is activated, antiracist work will not be prioritized.

Murray-Lichtman et al (2022) focus their research on social work training and disrupting institutional racism and white supremacy from the lens of CRT “one of many theoretical frameworks used to disrupt white supremacy in social work education” (pg. 147). Their efforts emphasize the need for anti-racism work to be infused in social work education, practices, and policy. This literature provides anti-racist definitions and tools to promote equitable education and recommendations to furthering anti-racism work within social work, providing heavy emphasis on BIPOC voices. They state, “Embracing counter-narratives amplifies the voices of BIPOC social workers and communities. This counter-dominant approach to pedagogy works to center the empowerment and liberation of BIPOC and other marginalized students” (Murray-Lichtman et al, 2022, pg. 141-2). Social work and its code of ethics have not been successful in

taking an anti-racist approach. Post covid-19 rates magnified the need for justice, due to this “professionals ignoring and silencing the voices of diverse groups of social workers, including BIPOC—in essence, racialized populations who have contributed theory, practice, and movements to humanize, heal and liberate oppressed people” (Murray-Lichtman et al, 2022, pg. 140). This further confirms that Critical Race Theory not only need to be infused in our education, but critical efforts must also be taken from an antiracist framework so that policies can be changed.

### **Internalized Racial Identity**

*I was raised in a household with both of my parents who were married. This however was short lived because in 1986, at four years of age, my father beat my mother, was battling drug addiction and subsequently went to prison for murder. My mother was now raising four children as a single parent, who refused any government assistance. Therefore, she began to sell drugs while working two full time jobs, with no education, trying to raise us. She too battled alcohol addiction and we went nights eating the same meal because unfortunately it was all that we had; but we did not go hungry. I only saw my mother in the morning, because she threatened to “beat our tails” if we did not go to school. We lived on the southeast side of Grand Rapids, MI in the 49507-area code. My siblings and I had to travel by city bus every morning (2 hours going and 2 hours returning) just to attend school on the north end to obtain adequate education. This is no exaggeration, and we still chuckle at the fact that we didn’t end up cycled into child welfare.*

*Being one of the youngest out of four siblings, it became natural to feel overlooked or disregarded. I always thought that I had to do what was best for everyone else, while setting aside what was best for me. Early on, I believed this was not a feeling that was intended by*



*others, but rather an insecurity that I placed upon myself. As I worked to progress who I was becoming, I had learned to give myself permission to accept who I was at that moment.*

Kendi (2022) discuss this ideology of Black student “isolated” due to being in advanced placement (AP) course. The isolation came from being told that AP courses were privileged in nature, and to be in such a course you were not like those who were not as privileged as you.

*As a Black female teenager, it was hard to navigate in spaces were very few in AP courses looked like me. Despite convincing myself that I worked hard to obtain such prestige, this also framed the idea that others like me were lazy and did not apply themselves. This level of isolation came with barriers. For Group projects teachers deemed it to be the responsibility of the student to create the group. Due to biases, I was never chosen. Despite the fact that the teacher could have easily created and diversified groups, I was always given the exception to work alone. I was “too Black” amongst my white peers despite my performance, yet I was “too white” amongst my Black peers resulting from my performance.*

“Internalized oppression is the moment that the oppressed accept the identities imposed on them by oppressors” (Pyke, 2010, pg. 557).

*Not only did I have trouble with my identity as a Black woman, raised in a two-parent home, graduating from high school in the top five percent of my class and approaching higher education as a first-generation student. I was struggling with making sure that I did not allow the negative identities created by our society to attach. Such as, being a single parent mother, going through a divorce and having to now raise two children with no income. I had to push the bar to make sure that I worked above the standard of what society deemed would be my outcome; broke, uneducated, all while surviving off the welfare system. From the outside I*

*appeared fine, but on the inside, I was dealing with a lot of traumas. On the inside, I was dealing with Internalized Racial Oppression.*

Internalized Racial Oppression, as defined by Crossroads (2023) is “a complex multigenerational socialization process that teaches People of Color to believe, accept and live out negative, societal definitions of self and to fit into and live out inferior societal roles. These behaviors support and help maintain the race construct” (pg. 3).

*It is not so much as to how racism showed up externally, but it was more so how it began to manifest internally. It also needs to be understood that because I lacked the education on how to identify the subtle tones of how racism can be exhibited, for the longest I felt this was a natural phenomenon. My earliest experiences with racism, were defined by the school district, unfortunately it was not until embarked on obtaining a higher education where I was then able to identify that it resulted from structural and institutional racism. It is when I learned (or the seed was planted) that my situation was not so normal and was a direct result of how we have been conditioned in society to act on false identities. When I first heard that, this had a huge impact on my identity and how I valued and or began to devalue how I felt about myself and my surroundings.*

*At 26 years old I made the decision to return to school as a full-time student. I was one of thirty African American students who were granted admission at GVSU in 2006. This was during one of the biggest proposals that was being voted upon: Proposal 2, which was later deemed unconstitutional for colleges to use Race as a factor in their admissions. The atmosphere was heavy due to the many voices that were subjective regarding affirmative action. As a result, Grand Valley came with many challenges. I was a non-traditional student, with many of my peers who were much younger and predominately white. I struggled to conform to the culture at*

*GVSU. Often being the only African American in class, I was often leaned on to be the “Voice” for the Black culture.” I did what became natural by staying under the radar, sitting in the rear of the class, being cautious to remain collective with my approach, and or opinions. This too was a struggle because when the cosmetics came off, and I would leave the class, morally I was not being true to myself, despite how ethical my perspective was. I rather gave insight on what I thought people wanted to hear versus what was needed.*

It needs to be understood why it is important to discuss Internalized Racist Oppression and the role it plays in this research. It also played a pivotal role in my interactions as a youth with teachers and the school district, and how that manifested and evolved with my interactions with the same population as an adult, and in my career as child welfare worker. “Many of these teachers have engaged in what is constructed as aversive racism, where white teachers may deny personal prejudice and see themselves as supportive of “fairness, justice, and racial equality” but they unconsciously act out their biases through labeling and further pathologizing their students” (Kelly et al, 2018, pg. 876). There can no longer be discussion involving institutional racism and institutional oppression without the sincerity in how this impacts ones mental, psychological, and emotional wellbeing.

A key part of the problem related to internalized racial oppression is its role in shaping an acceptance of one’s “deficits.” One research shows that “teacher bias is often based on deficit thinking and the belief that Black students have inherent weaknesses that preclude them from academic success. These teachers perceive cultural differences as deficiencies” (Kelly et al 2018, pg. 877). When Black children did not fit into western philosophies of societal norms, this is when teachers often strengthen their justifications for contacting child services. Working in the environment as a child welfare worker, I had to decondition my mind from a lot of areas where I

began to be compliant with behaviors, I manifested, as a direct result of my IRO's. I often "code switched" or spoke in a manner that was accepted by my counterparts; making sure that I didn't fit into the mold of how Black people were perceived "uneducated, ghetto or angry." Often, I would hear biases while speaking to mandatory reporters and became silenced, thinking that if I challenged the idea or resisted, then I am being insubordinate and hostile. It was as if it was mentally infantilized, even as an educated adult. Internalized Racial Oppression, defined by Crossroads (2023) "teaches people of color to live out negative societal definitions of self" (pg. 3).

I could not escape this behavior as a child welfare worker, therefore how do we expect our Black families to escape an oppressed system designed to keep them and their children at the hands of our oppressors? How do one mentally resist a system systemically designed to maintain race construct? Even more so when "how" Black children enter the system, the interactions they have with their workers, interventions designed by workers based on policy written with racist language. "One need not experience discrete, identifiable instances of overt discrimination to internalize racial oppression. White racism can infiltrate the world view of the racially oppressed without their conscious consent in a subtle process some refer to as indoctrination and mental colonization" (Pyke, 2010, pg. 7). I had become compliant with the very systems that were put in place to keep our children, "Black children" at the hands of the organization, due to ongoing racist construct. We are substantiating families who too have become compliant with a system based on the very agenda it was designed to carry out. One cannot advocate for oneself if the image of self is poor. Pyke (2010) describe this behavior as a form of self-hatred and the act of being subordinate to the philosophies of our oppressors, and insubordinate to the concepts of oneself. As a Black woman in this system of child welfare, it might be easiest to align with the

values of the oppressor to get along at work or to accept what that system thinks is best. But the point is, that system is hurting children and families and playing a role in reproducing a racist society.

## **Summary**

We have seen with the research that there are issues surrounding bias and systemic racism as contributing factors but there is evidence that supports these claims on the roles of teachers. Klein et al (2018) focus on schools that are primed to call child services on families to get them to comply. Often when children have behavioral issues in schools, they then try to remove the child from generalized educational settings to now place them in a class with children who have been identified to have a disability. “The school wanted the boy to enroll in classes exclusively for students with disabilities. Despite his behavior problems, for which he was eventually diagnosed with attention deficit and mood disorders, he did well academically” (Klein et al, 2018). Although mandated reporters are put in place to keep the children from being harmed or at risk of harm, “parents, lawyers, advocates, and child welfare officials said that schools occasionally wield this authority in inappropriate ways” (Klein et al, 2018).

A few ways can be introduced to counter systemic issues, racism, and biases from impacting referrals made to child welfare. One of the key areas to first consider are teacher staff in K-12 schools, who are the first point of contact with students. Cox et al (2017) discuss teachers receiving diversity training, but although diversity training is offered, there are concerns about the availability for teachers to complete it. One disappointment observed in this study is that diversity training was optional for teachers. Due to it being optional, participation was limited as many felt that they did not need diversity training. “Diversity training should be

mandated and be an ongoing professional development that is required for teachers to obtain and maintain tenure” (Cox et al, 2017, pg. 10).

Cox et al (2022) completed surveys with existing child welfare workers, who weighed in on the belief that cultural sensitivity training would be beneficial to teachers who report concerns about child maltreatment. Interviews were completed with teachers and preservice teachers. “Teachers are mandated by law to report child maltreatment, but preservice teachers may not receive training in their teacher education programs to identify child maltreatment, and their cultural values may impact their views on the parental use of corporal punishment leading to their decisions to report child maltreatment on children who receive parental corporal punishment such as spanking” (Cox et al, 2017, pg. 63). Valentin (2006) research discuss teacher education programs that should be utilized for preservice teaching to better prepare them for diverse classrooms. An area of concern Valentin (2006) notes is that there is no clear definition of culture and diversity, so this makes it difficult to identify. Teaching programs also need to equip teachers with the tools to successfully meet the needs of diverse populations. Mills (2013) focus on preservice teachers not being equipped or prepared to teach students who come from various backgrounds. Mills interviewed preservice teachers who did not find value in the diversity courses and noted that they did not seem to be authentic. It was concluded that further research is needed to compare other programs. It was also recommended that existing programs be restructured.

#### **4. Methodology**

Cox et al (2017) completed a quantitative study, where surveys were conducted of existing child welfare workers, who weighed in on the belief that cultural sensitivity training

would be beneficial to teachers who report concern for child maltreatment. In this study, closed-ended questions were utilized to obtain desired results.

I would mirror a similar study, but instead, my approach will be to use a qualitative analysis of survey responses for a much smaller sample size. I would survey ten child welfare workers within the State of Michigan. The survey will seek participants who work 1st shift hours, who I am familiar with through work-related connections. Although this is a convenient sample, as a graduate student with limited time and resources, this approach will show some elements of my hypothesis that can be proven with further research. If a more representative sample is taken, it would require a larger sample, taken from multiple locations of participants who have had interactions with a greater variety of teachers etc. to show a more precise measurement of the phenomenon.

The survey will close after receiving the results from the first ten participants. Responses can be submitted anonymously with the choice to provide their identity to be further contacted for potential clarification of responses. This format will help to gain the perception of complaints received from teachers.

With the recorded responses a comparative analysis will then be completed, looking for: reporting trends, biased language, understanding of maltreatment (neglect vs cultural differences), and understanding of mandated reporter obligations.

## **5. Mechanisms to assure the quality of the study**

Several ethical concerns were considered during the research. I first considered, “why only focus on child protection hotline workers?” Hotline workers are the gatekeepers for referrals received regarding children who are potentially being abused or neglected.

Understanding the perception of other hotline workers who interact with teachers daily, will

show if they too share the common belief that teachers as mandated reporters, often call with biased language that is perpetuated in child service referrals. It will also show if teachers understand what their mandated reporting duties are. Hotline workers are often having to provide on-the-spot training or details on what is needed to file a report or how to locate other training resources that are available but often are not reviewed before the report is filed. This is done in a very limited amount of time due to having to monitor call volumes so that children are not facing a further risk of harm.

Secondly, I thought about “why not survey teachers if the concerns are with teaching staff?” As a child welfare worker-within staff at the hotline, and as a trainer within the unit, accessing an area where change can be implemented quicker is a priority. Helping other hotline workers to identify where they can counter bias practices in their daily work. Teachers being trained is contingent upon availability and what can be approved with a professional development training day. This is an area I am unfamiliar with; thus, prolonging the change being initiated. It also needs to be noted that there is no standard practice on who should file the report. District to district procedures may vary. Some schools have the school social worker file the [CPS] referral, whereas others prefer this being completed by the school administrator. To reduce errors, the report should be filed by the mandatory reporter who heard the disclosure directly from the child or other involved parties. This can conflict with the credibility of the caller, and impact decision-making. I lastly asked, “why only 1st-shift workers?” First-shift workers have the most contact with teachers who report concerns during school hours. This is so that [CPS] can potentially make face-to-face contact with the child while they are in a safe environment.



Lastly, there were some restrictions to surveying a small sample size. This limited the ability to draw generalizable conclusions about perceptions of mandated reporters. A way to remedy this is by exploring more of the survey results in the future or having a larger sample size. Survey analyses are highly subjective, by going over the results with a critical eye or having a peer to review the results, this could help to alleviate confirmation bias. The survey was an attempt to produce a project that mirrored and or replicated aspects of published research, that can be expanded upon by another researcher.

## **6. Discussion of Findings**

A qualitative survey was conducted and sent to at least 161 workers at the call center. The first ten fully completed surveys were analyzed for interpretation. Please note, intakes are referenced in the survey questions and responses. The language of 'Intake' in the State of Michigan hotline is another term for child welfare referral, complaint, or allegations received regarding abuse and or neglect of a child. Mandated Reporter is often abbreviated as "MR."

After fully consenting to the survey, respondents were initially asked, how many years they have worked at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Child Welfare Hotline; zero to three years, four to seven years, or eight plus years? Six workers acknowledged having worked from zero to 3 years, with four working more than eight years. No one acknowledged working for 4-7 years.

Out of the ten participants, nine of them acknowledged having prior history as a "local level" child welfare worker. Those who worked at the local level, worked face to face with families in some capacity as opposed to just handling complaints that come through the call center. Local level workers were previously known as "field workers" however due to recent Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts in Michigan, this language is no longer used

because of historical context and who the term referenced during slavery. Eight of the ten respondents identified as African American, one identified as White and one identifying as other. Of the one respondent who identified as White, they were unable to provide or identify if a bias had occurred with any intake, they have handled at the call center.

In the past year, results show a 50/50 split where five employees received most of their intakes from teachers, and the other five received theirs from school social workers. Zero responses were received for the counselor, school nurse, administrator/principal, or any other school personnel.

The next set of results are responses to a set of open-ended questions which required participants to not only to select an appropriate response from the list of multiple-choice items, but to also then explain why the specific response was chosen. This method was used to gain participant perceptions of the intakes they handled from mandatory reporters. Many of the testimonials or stories provided were lengthy and all details were maintained as if any information was to have been redacted, it could have taken away from the context.

The first question that was asked was “Based on the intakes you have received from schoolteachers; do you feel cultural sensitivity training in formal education should be required?” All 10 respondents acknowledged that cultural sensitivity training in formal education should be required amongst teachers. When respondents had to explain why they felt teachers should receive cultural sensitivity training, there were several patterns that were reoccurring amongst responses. The first theme observed was the use of biases that were seen in intakes received from teachers or mandated reporters; biases stemming from one’s personal worldview.

The first respondent stated, “*School staff seem to frequently project their own standards of living onto others.*” While another stated “*There is also a lot of concern for those who work in*

*education who submit complaints based on personal feelings.” Another participant implied that “Teachers often times used their own opinions and ideas about parenting and identify that as abuse when in circumstances that is not the case.” These statements suggest that hotline workers think that teachers often call the hotline assuming what they believe to be happening with the child. Hotline workers believed that teaches need to use appropriate follow up questions to mitigate personal biases about what is happening before they contact child protections services [CPS]. This concept was mentioned in several responses from several participants. “Without seeking any follow up information from the child, the teacher concluded that this information could be indicative of abuse or neglect.” The allegations being provided by the teacher is often speculative in nature with no factual or first-hand knowledge. One participant stated that they “have received allegations of abuse/neglect where a teacher was concerned because ‘there are a lot of people living in the home.’ Additionally, there were concerns the child didn't have a bed because the child disclosed, they sleep on the couch. Black children often grow up in multigenerational households. Not having a bed, in and of itself, is NOT abuse or neglect. However, the teacher did not even inquire if the child had a bed but preferred the couch. This teacher had no indications that the child's basic food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, or medical needs were unmet. There are countless examples of teachers contacting the hotline for minuscule, unassignable concerns.” Teachers often would say when questioned about the validity of the reported concerns that they were not investigators and that this was the job of the [CPS] worker. The problem with this perception is that not all complaints that are reported with the suspicion of child abuse and neglect are assigned for investigation. Decisions are made based on the information received at the time of the call and are either screened in or out for investigation.*

The second theme that stemmed from the same question identified teachers and/or school staff being unable to determine what constitutes abuse or neglect as opposed to what was identified as a cultural difference or how language is subjective across cultures; the two seem to run parallel. One agent stated *“When allegations are received from MR’s (mandated reporters) they are not always culturally competent. In the Black community its nothing but a saying such as “ill knock your head off” for being bad in class. However, some MR’s that are not culturally competent feel this is a direct threat to harm the child which could just be a verbal phrase to express disappointment. Then the MR’s calls us and have no real evidence to suggest that the child is at risk aside from the verbal threat.”* This sort of observation appeared to be consistent across the experience level reported by the survey participants. A veteran worker stated, *“From my years of working in the child welfare system a lot of complaints of abuse or neglect stem from mandated reporters who are not understanding of varying cultures.”* Another provided that *“It is a fact that Black children face more/heavier consequences in school than their white counterparts. I have observed situations where teachers have a very broad view of what constitutes abuse/neglect. Additionally, teachers may interpret slang, African American Vernacular English, or colloquial language to mean abuse/neglect, when in fact it means the exact opposite.”* In addition to what seemingly was a cultural difference, there was also a lack of understanding when it came to cultural norms. One stated that more diversity training would help teachers better understand “cultural norms” in communities other than their own. They added *“some behaviors are accepted within other communities where it might be looked upon as something negative.”* They shared a belief that seems common amongst survey participants that better training *“would assist in conversations within the family versus being quick to assume and report.”* Another agent speculated that *“certain cultures' struggles are viewed as*

*neglectful/abusive when rather it may just be a poverty component that their role could likely assist the family in dealing with.” All the statements seemed to reveal that different participants still experienced similar situations amongst teachings staff. As one stated diversity training should be required “because some teachers in my opinion lack the understanding of knowing the difference between abuse over cultural differences when it comes to raising children.”*

The finding here suggest that some experienced hotline workers believe teachers do not always have a strong ability to identify what constitutes abuse or neglect. Teachers and any mandated reporter who calls the hotline comes with this expectation and credibility that is often weighted on their expertise, their level of education and understanding. Although *“hotline specialists have the responsibility of asking follow-up questions to determine if concerns meet investigation criteria, I do believe a lot of weight is put on the validity of a [CPS] complaint made by a teacher. This contributes to the overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system”*, emphasized one responder.

Respondents were asked to describe the most frivolous intake received from a teacher in the past year which they felt was due to cultural insensitivity? 70% of respondents noted that their frivolous intakes seemed to involve families from marginalized populations. There were a variety of responses received including children being hungry, drug use, absence of a father and physical abuse. One stated *“I had a teacher call in because the child was either hungry or dirty and no contact was made with the parent at any point.”* A child expressing hunger cannot be assumed that there is no food in the home. Further assessment is needed to determine if adequate food is in the home. If there is no food in the home, when was the child last fed? Are the parents purchasing food daily? Does the child appear to be malnourished or lethargic? Without knowledge it cannot be assumed. When assumptions are made, without proper assessment,

biases are actively occurring. One responder provided a complaint where *“The child and her father were wrestle playing and the child’s tooth was knocked.”* With no other details, this is not physical abuse, which is a non-accidental injury. What is described was done by accident while the two were playing. This would not warrant an investigation, because *“receiving calls for issues that have not happened yet, based on suspicion”* as stated by one participant, would not warrant a case because child services do not investigate unless something has occurred, very reactive in nature. Unless there is reasonable belief based on the allegations and details at the time of the complaint, and that the child is at immediate risk of harm, then [CPS] involvement otherwise is not warranted; *“here are some issues that can be dealt with on the school level instead of [CPS] intervention”* clearly stated by another agent.

Michigan’s Child Protection Policy (2013) states that *“the community may have failed to identify potential child abuse/neglect situations and provide services which could have prevented the need for [CPS] involvement”* (State of Michigan, pg 2- PSM 711-1). Michigan [CPS] policy is a public document accessible to anyone and if someone was truly helping a child, they will seek appropriate resources that are most effective. One provided the following story where they *“recently received a complaint advising that a 4-year-old Black child stated that the mom smoked weed, which is legal in Michigan. The teacher did not know if the mother smokes around the child or if the child overheard a discussion about this, saw it on TV, or in song lyrics. The teacher was unaware if the marijuana was medicinal. The child never came to school smelling of marijuana and mom never looked high at drop off or pick up. However, the teacher felt the child was too young to know what smoking weed is, meaning the child should have zero information/exposure to the term. Again, there is no indication that the child’s basic food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, or medical needs were unmet.”*

Survey data suggested an additional theme. Participants referenced experiences with multiple reports about children of color when no harm actually occurred, and the reported incidents seem to be merely a low-level of experience with diverse cultural household practices. *“A child (within the Black culture) received a minor burn after the parent dipped the child’s freshly braided hair in hot water to ‘seal them.’ This is normal practice to ensure braids do not unravel. The burn was accidental, and the mother was able to treat the minor injury at home. However, as the teacher had never heard of such practice, they were convinced that it must’ve been abuse/neglect.”* Another testimonial recalled *“[a] complaint involved a teacher overhearing a group of students talking. The teacher overheard an African American child say that they were up late because they had to cook dinner. The teacher did not gain any context to the statement but instead immediately called in a complaint alleging that the parents were neglecting the child, and making the child cook dinner late for the rest of the family. The teacher did not care to gain any clarity on what she overheard but stated they were aware there were multiple siblings in the home and this child they were reporting on should not be responsible for feeding all the kids in the home. This was a very frustrating intake to complete. There were several culturally offensive suggestive comments made within the allegations.”* This story was compelling because I couldn’t help but recall on my own experiences while working at the hotline for more than a decade, hearing culturally offensive comments, and how I began to internalize microaggressions. It was difficult having to set aside my personal feelings to maintain professionalism or being compliant in situations that should have been challenged.

When it came to concerns for potential child neglect, another agent shared that *“In certain cultures, if a father is not present, the eldest son will take on some of the fatherly roles of the household. A teacher reported that a 17-year-old student was supervising his younger*

*siblings while their single mother worked on the weekends to support them.” Teachers often would report concerns that the children were not being properly supervised due to the custodial parent being at work and the younger siblings being left in the care by the older minor child sibling. In Michigan, there is no law that specifies an age when a minor child can be left home alone or alone with other children. Lastly, another agent recalled “having a school counselor phone in a complaint regarding a teenager they felt was being abused because the teen was expected to maintain good grades, assist with housework, and assist with caring for younger children in the home. The counselor felt the teen was being abused because the teen had responsibilities that took priority over free time and socializing. The caller seemed to have no grasp on the reality that some parents have to work 2 or more jobs and long hours to financially support their household and that they rely on older children to assist with the household.” This is another instance where the caller imposed their own cultural norms or feelings on to another. Parenting does not equate perfection.*

Of the 70% of respondents whose complaints involved those from a marginalized group, 6 of Ten responses involved Black/African American families. Of those responses, key terms were provided where bias language was present in intakes they received from teachers. Some conclusions can be drawn but not limited to, are concerns with teachers having a low-level understanding of intercultural competency, or the inability to affectively communicate through discomfort that a lack of empathy was displayed with their choice of words.

*“He’s Black.”*

*“Wealthy and White.”*

*“Just had a feeling.”*

*“Colored or colored folks”* when referring to a person of color or African American.



“Baby daddy, baby mama, bastard child.”

“Bad part of an urban city (insert - Detroit, Flint, Benton Harbor, Holland, Monroe, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, any city with trailer parks/lots with heavy substance abuse). More assumption versus evidence.”

All Ten respondents had concerns that teachers could use mandatory reporter training. Yet, 30% (3) of respondents were not confident at all in locating mandatory reporting requirements. Whereas 30% (3) were extremely confident in locating mandatory reporting resources and requirements. 20% (2) were moderately confident and the remaining 10% (1) were very confident. One person did not provide an answer. These results, although close, also provide that if workers cannot easily locate information as trained child service agents, then we cannot expect teachers to locate information either. It also makes me question if the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services website needs to be updated, helping to make MR resources easily accessible.

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## Appendices

### a. Survey questionnaire

The following survey questions will be asked of each participant in the aforementioned.

1. How many years have you worked for Centralized Intake?
2. Do you have any prior history as a local office worker within child welfare? If yes, please describe the capacity in which you worked.
3. In the past year, who were MOST of your intakes received from, within the school system, that were mandated, reporters? For example, (teachers, social workers, school counselors, school administrators, coaches, bus aides, etc.)
4. Based on the intakes you have received from schoolteachers; do you feel required cultural sensitivity training in formal education should be required?
  - i. Yes
  - ii. No
  - iii. Not sure\_\_\_

Explain (N/A is not a suitable response).

5. Describe the most frivolous intake you received from a teacher in the past year, where you felt this was due to cultural insensitivity. (Please do not include names or personal identifying information.
6. Marginalization occurs due to unequal power relationships between social groups.

Examples of marginalized populations include, but are not limited to, groups excluded due to race, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, language, and/or immigration status.

Based on your response to question number 5, did the intake involve any members of a marginalized group?

- i. Yes \_\_\_
- ii. No \_\_\_
- iii. If yes, which marginalized population was described in the scenario above?

7. Please describe any biased language you have experienced while completing an intake.

8. Do you have any concerns that teachers could use mandatory reporter training?

- i. Yes \_\_\_
- ii. No \_\_\_

9. How confident are you in locating the mandatory reporting requirements for teachers who may be unaware of where these resources can be found?

- i. Not confident at all,
- ii. Slightly confident,
- iii. Moderately confident,
- iv. Very confident,
- v. Extremely confident

10. What is your race or ethnicity?

- i. Black or African American,
- ii. American Indian or Alaska Native,
- iii. White,
- iv. Hispanic or Latino,
- v. Asian,
- vi. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander,
- vii. Other.

## **b. Consent Form**

**TITLE:** Overrepresentation of African American Children in Child Welfare.

**RESEARCHERS:** Student: Mareeta M Bracken, Faculty Advisor: Joel Wendland-Liu-Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies.

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision whether or not to participate. Carefully consider this information and the more detailed information provided below the box. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide whether to participate.

**Voluntary Consent:** You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to show how African American children continued to be overrepresented in the child welfare system. Existing research illustrates how systems are used to put many Black families and youth into the sights of the school-to-prison pipeline. This issue is rooted in systemic and historical racism. The literature has revealed this and continues to show how teachers as mandated reporters play a role in shaping the outcome through how they perceive Black children to be subjected to abuse or neglect.

**Duration:** It is expected that your participation will last only for the time it takes for you to complete the survey. No further follow up will be needed.

**Procedures and Activities:** You will be asked to complete the survey entirely for the submission to be include in the pending research. The survey is estimated to take 10-15 minutes to complete.

**Risks:** There are minimal risks involved in participating. Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. Electronic data will be collected and/or stored for this research project. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there exists a minimal risk that data could be lost or stolen. To minimize

this risk, GVSU has a site license for Qualtrics which allows for increased data security measures to prevent potential breach of data.

**Benefits:** This study aims to show how this specific issue is rooted in historical and systemic racism. To show how Teachers as mandated reporters play a role in shaping the outcome through how they perceive Black children to be subjected to abuse or neglect. The benefit of this survey is that your responses will help aid in establishing a baseline on what training and or resources are needed to reduce disparities or gaps of knowledge that can impact child abuse and neglect referrals.

**Alternatives:** Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate.

**REASON FOR INVITATION:** You are being invited to participate based on your capacity as a child welfare hotline worker. I am seeking 1st shift workers for this study, as they have the most contact with schoolteachers, who typically file intakes during school hours.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SOCIETY:** The research will help aid in identifying areas where future research is needed. The goal is to potentially prove that teachers as mandated reporters play a role in shaping the outcome through how they perceive Black children to be subjected to abuse or neglect. It will also show how this specific issue is rooted in historical and systemic racism. With this knowledge, it will further help the school district redevelop professional development and potentially aid in higher education institutions restructuring teaching programs to better equip teachers with the tools to meet the needs of diverse populations.

**PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY:** There will be no records that will disclose the identity of participants, as participation will solely be anonymous. All information collected from you, about you or your agency is for the sole purpose of this research study and will be kept confidential to the fullest extent allowed by law. In very rare circumstances specially authorized university or government officials may be given access to our research records for purposes of protecting your rights and welfare or to make sure the research was done properly.

**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE:** By signing this consent form below you are agreeing to the following:

-The details of this research study have been explained to me, including what I am being asked to do and the anticipated risks and benefits.

-I have had an opportunity to have my questions answered.

-I am voluntarily agreeing to participate in the research as described on this form.

-I may ask more questions or quit participating at any time without penalty

**CONTACT INFORMATION:** If you have any questions about the study, you may contact,

**NAME:** Mareeta M Bracken PHONE:616-745-4499, E-MAIL:

Sparksm@mail.gvsu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance & Integrity at Grand Valley State University, 1 Campus Drive, Allendale, MI. Phone: 616-331-3197. E-mail: rci@gvsu.edu.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Grand Valley State University (Protocol #23-150-H).

**c. Other Relevant Documents**

GRETCHEN WHITMER GOVERNOR	STATE OF MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES LANSING	ELIZABETH HERTEL DIRECTOR
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**DATE:** 01/17/2023

**TO:** GVSU Office of Research, Compliance, and Integrity

**FROM:** Chontelle Williams

**SUBJECT:** IRB Protocol Submission 23-150-H

This letter is being provided as support that researcher, Mareeta Bracken, is permitted to research and survey employees of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS).

The MDHHS Institutional Review Board Administrator has confirmed Ms. Bracken's research does not require MDHHS IRB oversight.

We wish Ms. Bracken the best on her research endeavors.