World, Do You Hear Me?: Reimagining Black Boys' Voice in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the metanarrative surrounding Black boys in early childhood education and aims to endorse their role of participant-voice research in charting future scholarly endeavors. To do so, researchers are urged to be at the forefront of taking on this more comprehensive approach to understanding children's meaning-making and actions. Applying the theoretical frameworks of critical childhood studies and praxis, underpinned by consequential research in education as the methodology, a reflective academic approach was initiated. This intellectual exercise prompts a shift from the pervasive "at-risk" label towards recognizing Black Boys as "at-resourced" – capable and valuable contributors to educational and social environments. This study contributes to a reimagined educational narrative, whereby the foregrounding of Black boys' voices in early childhood education is valued and normalized.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education; Black Boys; critical childhood studies; praxis; consequential methodology.

INTRODUCTION

As a graduate student in the field of education, I felt I could be blindfolded, throw a dart, and still hit bull's-eye on research about Black male youth from a deficit lens. The data overwhelmingly centered problematic issues such as overrepresentation/ misdiagnosis in special education programs, overrepresentation in school discipline, underrepresentation in gifted and talented education, and problematic student-teacher relationship. More recent research has sought to counter deficient-oriented approaches tethered to Black boys' educational and sociocultural ways of navigating and succeeding in academic spaces. Regardless, their identities tied to race, gender, and age situates them to experience school very differently than many of their peers (Brooms & Clark, 2020). As Dumas and Nelson (2016) asserted "we have created a world in which Black boys cannot *be*" (p. 28). Yet, Black boys in every type of school across the world, can and do achieve. Admittedly, the educational landscape for young Black boys is unique, complex, and warrants scholarly attention.

While there exists a considerable number of studies on Black males, there is a significant dearth of literature detailing and amplifying their own voices (Howard, 2014), especially Black boys who find themselves talked to, talked about, but rarely asked to contribute to discourse involving them. Constructing and advocating for a humanizing space for Black boys within early childhood education research is audacious given the historical justification of oppression tied to religious and scientific reasoning (Kendi, 2016). As such, the young Black male body, mind, and spirit became enveloped in what Brown (2012) described as *a priori knowledge* – seeing "Black males' performance and capacities [are] reduced and essentialized through explicit and subtle discourse of deviance and difference" (p. 308). Aligning with Howard's (2014) assertion that silenced voices must be heard in educational debates, gaining perspective from Black boys is vital. There is an essential need for research that promotes authentic access to participant voice (Rumary et al., 2023) and especially children (Facca, et al., 2020) and Black boys' voices (Johnson, 2019) that challenge essentializing narratives of deviance.

This study sets out to address the reflective question, "*What has been the metanarrative of Black boys in early childhood education and how can an enhanced presence of their participant-voice in research contribute to future directions in the field*?" Of note, early childhood education and early elementary education have a common focus on fundamental learning and development throughout the crucial early years. Early childhood education normally encompasses the period from birth to age eight. However, early elementary education targets the transition from preschool to the primary grades (PK -2nd), with the aim of maintaining a consistent and logical educational path for the child. Therefore, I offer a literature review presenting a brief overview of existing research and gaps existing on early childhood education for Black boys. Next, critical childhood studies (Dumas & Nelson, 2016) and praxis (Freire, 1970/ 1973) as theoretical frameworks guiding this work will be presented. Then, outlining consequential research in education (Milner, 2023) as the methodology follows. By addressing three prompts laid out through our methodological frame, the Findings section will

detail reflexive-generated themes of: 1) Navigating voices: The dual edges of inclusion in research; 2) Amplifying Black male voices: A personal and professional journey in early childhood education; and 3) Transitioning from men to boys. Next, limitations of the study are covered. Finally, the implications and significance of research as activism in this field will be emphasized.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical and Sociopolitical Context

The educational experience of young Black males in America is largely characterized by deeply entrenched attitudes and practices of racial discrimination and structural challenges (Brooms, 2020; Howard, 2014; Noguera, 2009). This unique societal positioning locates Black boys at the intersection of multiple biases operating through raced, gendered, and age paradigms. As a result, Black boys have incurred a significant impact influencing their academic and social trajectories (Thomas, 2024). By way of comprehensive examination scholars have pointed to the persistent effects of integration/ segregation and educational disparities contributing to sociohistorical obstacles (Brown, 2011; Givens, 2021; hooks, 1994; Johnson, 2013). Studies have indeed highlighted how the sociocultural conditions of Black boys cannot be separated from their educational experiences.

A significant body of research examining Black boys in early childhood education emphasized the lack of cultural congruence present within their curriculum, instruction, and teachers (Ford, 2020; Johnson, 2022; Kunjufu, 1995; Wilson, 1991). Ladson-Billings' (1995) research with highly effective teachers of African American kids resulted in the now widely-cited concept of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). CRP, which three tenets include: 1) academic achievement, 2) cultural competence, and 3) sociopolitical consciousness, "in many spaces has become a common way of approaching teaching and learning" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75). Yet, as George (2024) contends recent legislation in several states mirrors a long history of constructed inequality designed to deny Black children access to equitable education. Regardless of the various pedagogical strategies, frameworks, and challenges, scholars encourage the development of authentic caring (Clark, 2019; Noddings, 2015) and revolutionary love (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2023) of educators towards Black students that extends beyond strict academic responsibilities (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

Spanning the course of decades, educational research has utilized the term "at-risk" to categorize Black boys (Brown, 2016; Howard, 2014). This "at-risk" metanarrative has led to a public fixated on the negative outcomes associated with their academic and social experiences. Adhering to this viewpoint further added to deficit-oriented approaches whereby Black boys were predominantly perceived in regards of their needs and potential challenges instead of their potential capabilities (Ladson-Billings, 2014). After *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, "at-risk" "became a popular way to describe students assumed likely to experience low academic achievement" (Brown, 2010, p. 2078). For young Black males this exercise was a continuation

of the American school system positioning them as different from the "average" student. This Othering creates circumstances whereby Black boys are viewed as older and deviant (Brown, 2011; Goff et al., 2014). Dumas and Nelson (2016) argued that such an anti-Black social milieu made "Black boyhood (is) socially unimagined and unimaginable" (p. 26).

That said, in recent years more researchers have shifted from the "at-risk" identifier to recognizing Black boys as valuable resources and contributors to classrooms and society (Johnson, 2019;2022; Kumah-Abiwu, 2022). This revised perspective connects to a legacy not often celebrated in Eurocentric training that emphasizes the qualities and abilities Black children bring to the school environment. Afrocentric, multicultural, culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies all aimed to improve educational outcomes for Black students (Asante, 1998; Banks, 1995; Gay, 2018; Karenga, 1986; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Paris, 2012). More specifically, strategies directly connected to enhancing the schooling of Black boys were outlined (Bryan, 2020; Essien, 2017; Wright & Ford, 2019). Each approach reflected sociopolitical conditions and encompassed one of four ideologies: Black nationalism, Black liberalism, critical theory, or functionalism (Grant et al., 2016). These paradigm re-shifts acknowledged not only systemic challenges but more importantly built upon Black boys' assets and capabilities.

Despite ample educational and sociocultural research on Black boys, a discrepancy exists in studies examining their PreK – 2nd grade experiences (Johnson, 2019) and a gap resides in literature centering their voice (Howard, 2014). Therefore, this study encourages more researchers to consider the lived experiences and attitudes of young Black boys in early childhood education – underscoring the need to amplify their voices. This approach reinforces "how a focus on Black children's relationality can be tethered to Black futurity in ways that disrupt both coloniality and human centeredness" (Nxumalo, 2021, p. 1197).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Childhood Studies

Critical childhood studies (Dumas & Nelson, 2016) shares common goals with other emancipatory and liberatory frameworks such as post-colonial theory, feminist/ womanist theory, and critical race theory. Collectively, these frameworks seek to deconstruct dominant beliefs and practices. This alignment illustrates a mutual dedication to questioning conventional and idealized educational research and teaching methods, which often negate the sociopolitical and cultural circumstances of youth (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017). Not only does critical childhood studies consider social norms and patterns to shed light on phenomena, but it also explores the imaginations and aspirations of young participants (Sayer, 2010). Critical childhood studies is particularly effective in addressing sociopolitical issues confronting young Black boys as many of their experiences lie at the nexus of race, gender, and age (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). This study utilizes critical childhood studies to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the "everydayness" of Black boys' educational experiences.

The interdisciplinary nature of critical childhood studies allows for in-depth investigation of childhood from multiple viewpoints, underscoring the range of childhood experiences in a pluralistic society. Faulkner and Zolkos (2015) forwards the idea that critical childhood studies exist in the spaces between disciplines and therefore has the potential to generate new knowledge. Although there is no one approach to critical childhood studies, one major tenet of the theory is an emphasis on the present and active involvement of children. Inherently, one must acknowledge and address the disparate needs and perspectives of children. This study promotes the need to go beyond acknowledging the perspectives of young Black boys. It necessitates taking tangible steps to encourage their active involvement and integration in early childhood education research and discussions. As a result, their unique lived experiences and perspectives can contribute to transforming early childhood education into a more enlightening space.

Praxis

This project is also guided by Freire's (1970/ 1973) notion of praxis, which is essential for critically examining and improving one's research. Built on Marxist philosophy, Freire put forth that praxis was an essential element of human life and "human nature is expressed through intentional, reflective, meaningful activity situated within the dynamic historical and cultural contexts that shape and set limits on that activity" (Glass, 2001, p. 16). Praxis involves not only comprehending the world, but also changing it. Through introspection of their attitudes and practices, researchers can discern areas that require enhancement and implement changes to cultivate a process that is authentic and academically invigorating. Critiquing, reconceptualizing self, and envisioning are major components of praxis (Luitel & Dahal, 2020). This process of reflection enables an ongoing cycle of self-assessment to ensure methods are relevant to students and shifts in society (Freire, 1970 / 1973), especially with Black boys given the structural obstacles that hinder optimal learning opportunities.

Applying praxis, the researcher's responsibility extends beyond conventional means including the important tasks of critically examining one's practices and the sociopolitical matrix in which these practices are rooted (Soto & Swadener, 2002). Through a process beginning with ongoing introspection to proactive strategies, researchers have the ability to question, modify, and remove prevailing standards that frequently disregard Black boys in early educational settings (Bryan, 2021). A more praxis-oriented approach promotes more responsive and just educational system (Quigley & Mitchell, 2018). By combining Freire's concept of praxis with critical childhood studies, a better understanding of the power dynamics and cultural contexts that influence the educational trajectories of Black boys in early childhood settings is made possible (Palaiologou & Male, 2019). Thus, we employ both frameworks to advocate for substantive improvements in the early childhood education of Black boys. As Allsup (2003) posits, praxis "is not simply the capacity to imagine alternative scenarios, but is instead the slow burning fuse of possibility and action" (p. 157).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Consequential Research in Education

The methodology operatized in this work is innovative, nuanced, and based on the notion of consequential research in education, as described by Rich Milner, the President of AERA for 2022-2023, in his presidential address. Milner accentuated the significance of research that has impact and connects with decisions and results affecting young people, educators, researchers, families, policymakers, and communities. This methodology requires a departure from conventional research paradigms, instead focusing on initiatives that bridge the gap between research and practice. These endeavors aim to address societal concerns, while promoting fairness, belonging, and justice in the field of education (Milner, 2023).

Consequentialism as a paradigm of ethical theory is understood in a myriad of ways; however, all definitions adhere to "whether something is right or wrong depends completely on the outcomes that occur" (Horta et al., 2022, p. 368). Conducting consequential research in education requires a dedication to enhancing the well-being of individuals, particularly those from underserved areas. Milner (2023) shared the following entitled slides: a) Defining the Consequential, b) Consequentiality, c) Epistemic Reinvestment, and d) Consequential Research to explicate how researchers can enhance effectiveness. The objective of this study is to examine the potential consequences of including a greater number of voices from Black boys in the field of early childhood education. According to Milner (2023, para. 7) consequentialism calls on scholars to understand:

- the potential good and bad of a process or outcome,
- why they do what they do,
- power and people in knowledge construction,
- their own subjectivities in decision making,
- challenges of objective aims in human science,
- with whom they share their lives and prioritize their work.

This study addresses three (3) of the prompts to: 1) examine the possible advantages and disadvantages of inclusion of more voices, 2) further comprehend the reasons for my research, and 4) explore my usage of the term "boy" as a subjectivity in researcher decision making.

This approach entailing a deliberate shift in priority towards reflection on one's research has significant consequences. This approach is in accordance with Milner's (2023) plea for scholars to actively engage with individuals, especially those who are most marginalized, by shedding counterproductive means. This reflective work, framed by consequential research in education, highlights segments of the qualitative methodology, critical hermeneutic phenomenology (Mobley Jr., 2019) applied in my previous studies. This method involved Black boys as co-researchers, enabling their experiences and viewpoints to shape the research. Personal stories were collected and analyzed to better understand the cultural and social contexts of their schooling. By accentuating these specific segments within the broader

framework of consequential research in education, I aim to generate findings that can impact educational practices and policies advocating for Black boys' voices in early childhood education research.

Milner argues the foundation of new directions in research lie in the moral and ethical obligation to examine and shape significant decisions and results in the field of education. This commitment warrants attention to and intervention in systemic disparities, for example the disproportionate disciplinary actions taken against Black boys (Carothers, 2018), with the aim of more equitable outcomes. Following Milner's principles of epistemic reinvestment, my hope is to enhance the field's perspective, gain insight from historical contexts, recognize the dangers of isolation and polarization, evangelize the importance of underrepresented voices, expand comprehension of valid knowledge, and rethink customary research standards. Ultimately, the efficacy of this type of research may not be gauged by institutional acknowledgement, but by the discernible influence it engenders in the lives of Black boys and their communities.

FINDINGS

Key findings due to researcher self-reflection are presented below. The findings provide a detailed and intimate account of how specific researcher deliberations can challenge conventional views and contribute added perspective to Black boys' experiences in education.

Navigating Voices: The Dual Edges of Inclusion in Research

Consequential research in education (Milner, 2023) asks the researcher to wrestle with the potential good and bad of a process – for the purposes of this study, that process refers to the increased inclusion of Black boys' voice within the field of early childhood education. The efforts to incorporate the viewpoints of children in research is lauded for its ability to infuse intellectual discussion with a different sociocultural perspective, especially in the field of early childhood education. Nevertheless, the incorporation of "voice" is not devoid of its inherent challenges.

Integrating children's voice into research is replete with theoretical and methodological impediments. For researchers, such as Komulainen (2007), due to the nuances surrounding the "ambiguity of the child's voice," found it crucial to deconstruct the idea of children's voice to understand it as a multidimensional social construction. As such, "listening to children's voices' may be a good starting point for a social study of children's lives" (p. 13); however, since voices are always social and fluid (Bakhtin, 1986), to be truly child-centric, their voice must permeate expanded aspects of the research process. Implementing Black boy's voice pre-, during, and post-research process requires an understanding of sociopolitical conditions and epistemological sensitivities to avoid misinterpretation, misrepresentation, ethical dilemmas, and perpetuating stereotypes through superficial and token inclusion. Although researchers must navigate the intricacies of child voice in early childhood education with caution and integrity, doing so actively reduces epistemic injustice (Murris, 2013) - when a person is wronged in their capacity as a knower, regularly associated with Black boys schooling experiences.

There are numerous advantages to prioritizing children's perspectives in early childhood education (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; James, 2007). Researchers can gain detailed insights into young learners' comprehension of their social environment, identities, and sense of belonging by highlighting the voices of children. This is especially true if these voices have been traditionally overlooked. My scholarship rests at the intersection of early childhood critical literacy, social studies teacher education, and civics education. Each of these fields of study are more informed by bringing attention to the voices of children, specifically with my research – Black boys, as exampled here when discussing fundamental aspects of citizens' rights:

Researcher: Rights are like protection. Rights give you the ability to be-

Smith: Who you are.

Researcher: … yes without somebody doing anything bad to you.

Foxx: How do they do that?

Researcher: … by making sure you come to school, making sure you get your mail, making sure that they make laws … making sure that your parents and people in the community are treating you right and safe.

Hopkins: And make sure milk is not spoiled! (Johnson, 2023, p.812)

The milk expiration analogy made by Hopkins exemplifies how children, as highlighted by critical childhood studies, have unique ways of understanding social policies and forming distinct contributions based on their lived experiences (Nxumalo and Cedillo 2017).

Furthermore, the above-mentioned dialogue is an illustration of the adherence to seeking a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1976) or co-construction of meaning between researcher and child participants. Children's voice should not be limited the Findings sections but infuse other aspects of research. By doing so, space is granted for the third hermeneutic, the reader, to decipher the data how they see fit as they introduce their own horizon. While entanglements (Shannon & Hackett, 2024) concerning the inclusion of voice do exists, the ground is nonetheless laid for more complex and comprehensive understandings of the issues facing them and our society.

Amplifying Black Male Voices: A Personal and Professional Journey in Early Childhood Education

> Leave it up to me while I be livin' proof
> To kick the truth to the young Black youth
> - Wu-Tang Clan (1993)

In continuing with the prompts of consequential research in education (Milner, 2023), the researcher is encouraged to explore the question, "Why I do what I do?" As a researcher and teacher-educator, I am driven by the concept of reciprocity to enhance the educational experiences of Black boys in early childhood education by centering their perspectives and experiences in research (Johnson, 2019/ 2022/ 2023; Jackson et al., 2014). This commitment is due to the amazing nurturing I received as a kid from my family and community, but also the alarming fact that Black men make up less than 2% of the teaching profession (Brown & Thomas,

2020). Being a Black male in this field, I am appreciative and aware of the responsibility associated with this position. My positionality simultaneously shapes my epistemological stances (Dillard, 2000) and fuels inquiry towards exploring spaces where Black children can without threat or harm simply express themselves freely and be valued for who they are.

The term "Doc" (Johnson et al., 2024) best reflects the professional aspiration of my scholarly identity. I aspire to be a conduit of knowledge, wisdom, and guidance. Within both academic and community contexts, the term "Doc" signifies an individual who has gained admiration and trust through their expertise and communal contributions. This person embodies the responsibilities of the Black educator tied to the legacy Black intellectual thought, which troubles and disrupts problematic and racist knowledge construction, while privileging instructional approaches that empower Black students, families, and communities (Grant et al., 2016). This designation of "Doc" demonstrates the cultural importance and enduring connection of mentorship and education.

The focus of my research is primarily informed by qualitative methods, which emphasize the significance of storytelling and the need to augment the voices of individuals who are frequently excluded from or de-centered within educational discourse. Moreover, my research exploring the lived worlds of Black boys in early elementary (aligned with that of early childhood education because the students were age 8 or younger) revealed sophisticated understandings of citizenship. Here, while interviewing Black boys in the first- and second-grade about citizenship, Miami (pseudonym) considered Colin Kaepernick's protest intentions, rationale, and agency:

Researcher: … So the whole stadium is saying the pledge or and anthem and standing up with their hand over their heart, but these three gentlemen are not. So do you think … what type of citizens does that make these three and why would they be taking a knee instead of standing up? Why do you think they would take a knee?

Miami: Because they're bad citizens.

Researcher: And what makes them bad?

Miami: Are they bad citizens?

Researcher: That's a good question, the reason why they're taking the knee during the pledge is because they say that police are not treating Black people good. So until that or something happens with that, when people stand up to say their allegiance, the players they're gonna take a knee so they want more awareness and people to be aware of the that trouble is going on. So, in that case do you think that makes them … what type of citizens do you think that makes them?

Miami: A maybe citizen.

Researcher: A maybe citizen? Alright okay and why would they be a maybe citizen?

Miami: Well, they do have a good point. (Johnson, 2019, p. 382)

Miami's "good point" exhibited children's intellectual and emotional capacities. The research participants understood the maybe citizen to include two distinct circumstances. First,

the maybe citizen presented a title-action conflict (i.e. a doctor intentionally performing malpractice). Second, the maybe citizen was defined by how society (mis)treats one despite respectable conduct. Again, guided by critical childhood studies, we see "how these perspectives might enact knowledge-making that politicizes, unsettles, and (re)stories place-based studies of childhood (Nxumalo and Cedillo, 2017, p. 99).

Am I a guru concerning Black boys and early childhood education? No, but I hope to be on that "life-long learner" track my former professor, Dr. Carol Thompson encouraged me to initiate as an undergraduate. One that allows my work to improve the educational experiences of all students, and in particular Black children. My compelling research goal is to make a positive impact on society by giving young Black males in early childhood education the opportunity to be heard, understood, and appreciated and for fellow researchers to recognize the value in doing so themselves. Black boys' multiple perspectives undoubtedly have the currency to grant insight and shape educational theory and practice.

Transitioning From Men to Boys

The final question I engage pertaining to consequential research in education (Milner, 2023) prompts scholars to explore their own subjectivities in decision making. In my examination of early childhood education for Black males, the intentional choice to use "boy" or "boys" has been a meticulous decision, steeped in a sociohistorical and cultural context that cannot be ignored. This terminology, albeit simple, carries a weight of significance, specifically when considering the adultification of Black boys – a phenomenon where they are perceived as older and more deviant than their actual age (Dancy, 2014). This misperception has dubious implications, influencing how Black boys are treated within educational and social settings.

The term "boy," particularly in my upbringing in the southern region of the United States, is fraught with derogatory connotations, often used to belittle and dehumanize Black men. My decision to include the usage of "boy" in reference to young Black males in my research is therefore not taken lightly. It is a conscious effort to reclaim, redefine, and reimagine the term, to advocate for the recognition of Black boys as children deserving of the protection, innocence, care, love, forgiveness, and support routinely afforded to their peers. Gilmore and Bettis (2021) discuss the antiblackness and adultification of Black children, underscoring the urgent need for systemic change. By consciously choosing to articulate "boy" now more than "young Black male" in research, I aim to challenge and dismantle entrenched biases, advocating for a stance that views Black boys as they are: children with all the complexities, vulnerabilities, and potential that childhood entails.

Scholars the likes of Anne Dyson (1986) and Maxine Greene (2000) extol the importance and utility of children's imagination within education settings. Still, the societal perception of Black childhood, and subsequently Black boyhood, significantly restricts the freedom of Black boys to imagine themselves as they choose (Dumas and Nelson, 2016). Yet, when provided the space to express themselves through imaginary means, issues taking place within schools can be addressed also. My interview with Smith (pseudonym) exemplifies this point:

Smith: Yeah and every time somebody bully me I'll put the mask on... and but first once you put the mask on, first your dog, he go-

Researcher: Hold on. Tell me, have you had instances where you feel like you've been bullied?

Smith: Yeah.

Researcher: And what have you done?

Smith: Oh, what I did was I told the teacher. But she didn't listen. So I was watching the Mask like... I was thinking about finding it. So I asked my mom, "Can you pull up a real, live mask thing?" And she said it was in the ocean or sea somewhere deep, deep. So I said when I grow up, I'm going somewhere where it's a lot of water like the ocean or the sea...or the pond. If I can find it, I'll put it on. (Johnson, 2017, p. 104-105)

Here, our initial conversation about (super)heroes flowed into Smith talking about his experience with bullying. This then provided the opportunity for all research participants to speak about how to best navigate bullying and other interpersonal circumstances at school in a constructive way. Allowing for play, discovery, and imagination, regularly dismissed in favor of prioritizing high-stakes testing scores and zero-tolerance policies, facilitated what Long et al., (2013) conceptualized as *syncretism* – "learning environments where previously silenced voices become prominent, legitimate and influential in the learning process" (p.423).

Nelson and Wright (2023) argue the importance of reimagining guidance and mentoring for Black boys in early grades (PreK-3rd grade), emphasizing the need to protect and nurture them. That said, even well-meaning efforts towards Black boys can be preoccupied with their preparation for adulthood, understanding them as "only important in light of who society wants them to be, or have fears associated with who they might become as adult Black men" (p. 227). Carey (2019) forwards the idea of *comprehensive mattering* seeking "to draw out the boy nestled restlessly inside the tropes of the socially imagined 'Black male'" (p. 384). This outlook aligns with my research objectives, aiming to create educational environments where Black boys can simply be seen, heard, and understood in their *now*. My decision to use "boy" and "boys" in my research is both an engrossed methodological and ideological choice reflecting a commitment to reconceptualizing self and researcher practices pertaining to Black male youth.

Limitations

Possible limitations of this study exist within utilizing praxis (Freire, 1970/ 1973) as a theoretical framework and consequential research in education (Milner, 2023) as a methodology. Researcher praxis requires focusing on the connection and possible transformation that can arise from reflection on one's theory and practice. This self-reflection may fall short in acknowledging structural conditions operating simultaneously. Also, though the pioneering application of consequential research in education as a methodology offers a novel and appropriate approach, a lack of established methodological protocols and scarcity of empirical studies validating its effectiveness can engender critique.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The research findings illuminate the complexities of Black boys' educational experiences within broader societal undercurrents and educational imperatives. These experiences are marked by systemic disparities (Dumas & Nelson, 2016), historical adultification biases (Nelson & Wright, 2023), but also acts of protection (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021) and revolutionary love (Boutte & Bryan, 2021; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022). In recognizing Black boys in early childhood education – a demographic too often muted by the cacophony of deficit-oriented discourses, my research looks to amplify their voices, endorsing a narrative that aligns with their developmental stages and genuine lived experiences.

Acting as a form of academic activism, this research contests embedded norms and promotes refreshed perspectives that counter deficit narratives ascribed to Black boys. By foregrounding their voices, this study aligns with recent scholarship that emphasizes the advantages of participatory and inclusive research practices that not only involve but centralize the experiences of these young individuals (Facca et al., 2020; Gilmore & Bettis, 2021). This study, therefore, serves as a response to examining the convergence of scholarly inquiry and activism (Kressler, 2020) in which Black boys are portrayed and engaged within educational research. As such, research-as-activism grants "new eyes" to see and understand that justice and equity are at the center not the periphery (Roy, 2018) of research outcomes.

Guided by the frameworks of critical childhood studies (Dumas & Nelson, 2016) and praxis (Freire, 1970/ 1973), along with the methodology of consequential research in education (Milner, 2023), this study also draws attention to how vital researcher positionality is in shaping the process and outcomes of research. As elaborated by Hart and Hart (2018):

Research as activism means conceptualizing researcher as primary instrument at every stage of the inquiry process… [and] researchers thus have responsibilities for articulating their perspective on the learner in the world whether represented or part of a collaborative construction of meaning or as entangled becomings (p.32).

As a Black male scholar with southern roots in the United States, my researcher positionality brings novel understandings to otherwise mundane terms such as "boy" and "citizens" to help trouble standard conceptualizations. This reflexivity informs theoretical and methodological approaches that are sensitive to and critical of discourse describing and depicting Black boys within early childhood education.

In advancing the field of early childhood education, it is essential for researchers to introspectively examine their own positionality and other decisions regarding their research process to assess its potential to predominate interactions with and representations of Black children. This is especially apropos given society's sociohistorical positioning of Black boys and the fixation of 'crisis' pertaining to Black manhood often sidelining the actualization of Black boyhood (Thomas et al., 2022). This study acts a possible model of deconstructing epistemological stances while fostering the potential to disrupt the absence and essentializing of Black childhoods. Future research should extend beyond verbal and written expressions to

include auditory and visual articulations such as photos, videos, and performance. Future directions should also strive to incorporate Black boys' voices through diverse and innovative modalities – embracing and incorporating technical advancements such as generative AI. Changes in researcher orientations, which may range from small, personal modifications to audacious and awe-inspiring public declarations, have the potential to act as a pivot for research as activism. Such shifts by early childhood education researchers promote "schools that not only teach Black boys well but also are willing to learn from and be shaped by all children, from their first days forward" (Dumas and Nelson, 2016, p. 43). By acknowledging and implementing the multifaceted expressions of Black boys' voices, researchers contribute to a more dynamic and just educational narrative, subsequently affirming their humanity in the here and now.

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