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The Spirit-Murdering of Black Students from White Educators

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The Spirit-Murdering of Black Students from White Educators

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Courtney Jude

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Dedications

Courtney Jude

I stand on the shoulders of my ancestors' sacrifices. I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Larry and Seameah Jude, who did not have the option to go to college but believed that further education would be a priority for both of their children. We have both graduated college with advanced degrees. I dedicate this dissertation as well to my grandparents: Dennis, Elma, Rosie, Lorraine, Nelson, and Willie. If it were not for your sacrifices through life, I would not have been able to work as far as I have in life in the educational field. You grew up in a world where formal elementary education was not commonplace, and yet you understood the importance of education for your family.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my wife and children. My wife deserves the utmost thanks for supporting me in my work. Whether it was through late-night typing and editing or mid-day frustrations, you were always there to ground me in the goal at hand. Finally, I dedicate this to my children (Imani and Ryan), may you see this and continue to raise us to the next level.

Sarah Guilfoyle

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my grandparents who did not have the opportunity to go to college, I hope you are proud of how far we've come! To my parents who were both educators, you paved the way for me to become a teacher and instilled in me a love of learning. To my husband, Brian, I know I would not have done this without you. You inspire, challenge, and support me, and I am forever grateful. To my sons, Cole and Luke, I hope you will someday understand the importance

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Abstract

In this collection of autoethnographies, four researchers explored our deeply personal experiences and encounters with racialized oppression in the form of spirit-murder. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies, this dissertation explores how two white educators have committed spirit-murder against Black students and how two Black educators have both experienced spirit-murder as students and have spirit-murdered their Black and Brown students as classroom teachers. We wanted to elevate our voices using counter-stories as a tenet of CRT and examples of our teaching practices. We aimed to elicit relatable suggestions to combat spirit-murdering from white educators toward Black students during their grade school and college experiences. All four educators hoped that by sharing, we exposed not only the existence and effects of spirit-murder and ways we were working to eliminate these unfair acts and practices but also ways to better support Black children in classrooms where racist school systems still exist. We reflected on the personal damage caused to us as Black children and created by us towards Black children as white and Black educators. We analyzed the importance and value of a person's spirit, the term "murder," and the phrase "spirit-murder," as they related to our experiences. We shared encounters from grade school to college classrooms in public, private, urban, and suburban settings. Our cohort dissertation group consists of a Black male who is an assistant principal, a white male who is a former visual arts teacher and is now an athletic director, a white female who is a high school English teacher, and a Black female who is a district culture and climate coordinator.

Key terms: Critical Race Theory, Critical Whiteness, autoethnography, racism, school systems, spirit, spirit-murder, and trauma

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

In December 2018, 16-year-old biracial wrestler, Andrew Johnson, who attended Buena Regional High School in New Jersey was given 90 seconds to make a split-second decision before his wrestling match to either cut his dreadlocks or forfeit the match. The referee was eventually reprimanded, but the emotional damage was already done (McGurk, 2019, p. 1). This incident made national headlines because the image portrayed of the teen who identifies as Black and Puerto Rican appears in videos and pictures with sharp scissors being held to his head as a trainer on the athletics staff, who happened to be a white female, rushed to cut his dreadlocks to a shorter length, was horrific (Washington, 2019). The pain that this caused resonated within the Black community because it resembled a time in our history when Black slaves endured different but similar treatment against their will.

In January 2020, DeAndre Arnold, a senior who attended Barbers Hill School in Mont Belvieu, Texas, was told that he would not be able to attend his high school graduation if he did not cut his hair (Evans and Coghill, 2023, p. 1). Arnold wore his hair in dreadlocks. As a result of this occurrence, the law known as the CROWN Act was created, which stands for Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair. This law was created by the CROWN Coalition and Dove to ensure the protection against and to stop race-based discriminatory practices in schools, housing, and workplaces (the CROWN Coalition, 2019).

In October 2023, Darryl George, a Black 17-year-old high school junior who also attends Barbers Hill School, was placed in In-School Suspension (ISS) for the way he wears his hair. The dress code policy for his school requires that boys' hair must not touch their eyebrows or earlobes. George's mother is pursuing a lawsuit against the school district for not upholding the CROWN Act, and because her son is being punished for how long his dreadlocks would be if he were to unpin them, even though he never does. His dreadlocks are always twisted back in a style situating them away from his ears and eyes. She is advocating for her son not only because of his isolation from his classmates while he sits in ISS, but because he has to sit on a stool for the entire school day in the ISS room (Jackson, 2023, p. 2). This racially insensitive dress code policy seems to be a recurring pattern for Barbers Hill High School.

We know from experience and research that Black students are consistently spirit-murdered in schools all over the world through racially oppressive school systems to control and disregard Black students and what matters to them. We also know from experience that the impact can be immeasurable. This is “a longstanding issue in the United States, particularly in schools where dress codes can discriminate against students” (Evans and Coghill, 2023, p. 1). These incidents might make an unaware person wonder, what is the real purpose of this rule or this policy, and for whom was it created? They might even agree with the policy for lack of knowledge. For those who are *woke* and aware, we know the unfortunate truth. These racially discriminatory practices are examples of how Whiteness affects Black people.

These acts of racialized oppression are what we refer to as spirit-murdering in relation to educators and staff members in positions of authority causing emotional harm to Black and Brown students. Though the term, spirit-murder, was coined by Patricia Williams in the legal field it was brought to light in the education realm by Dr. Bettina Love. Spirit-murder, according to Love (2016), is “the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable structures of racism” (p. 2).

Anytime Black people are told that they are not enough, that their culture and practices are unacceptable and wrong, or that they need to fit a Eurocentric standard, we are spirit-murdering them. In each of the examples listed above, the three Black students were being spirit-murdered because they were each made to feel that their natural hair, which they valued, was unbecoming, “unnatural,” and unworthy. “But the brouhaha over the style of a high school student’s hair is really another example of the unnecessary infringement upon our personal freedoms, especially when cultural issues are involved” (Jackson, 2023, p. 2). Whiteness infringes upon and spirit-murders Black students in a myriad of ways. To be clear, anyone can be spirit-murdered, but there is a certain type of racial spirit-murdering between white teachers and Black students.

There are many factors with this issue; many educators do not see it as a problem, others do not recognize that they are part of the problem, and some see the problems and choose to be bystanders without enforcing change because they do not see it as their problem, and the list goes on. As hooks (2013) states:

When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white supremacist values and beliefs, even they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination . . . they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they wish to see eradicated. (p.113)

The four of us recognized our behaviors and faults in this regard and we felt passionately about this issue. As a result, we chose to focus our autoethnography on spirit-murdering, particularly how Whiteness affected and spirit-murdered two of us Black students who experienced racist school systems, and how we spirit-murdered Black students in our classrooms; while the other two of us engaged in spirit-murdering practices towards Black students, as white educators. We explored our ongoing journey to making changes in our practices, shifted our mindsets, and advocated for and supported the Black students that we encountered.

Anchor Stories Introduction

Each researcher thought it was important to include our unique anchor stories and examples at the beginning of our dissertation, and later in chapter three, which allowed readers to connect with us on a personal level. We wanted our audience to be able to bridge the gap between the spirit-murdering that is happening to Black children around the world to ourselves as the researchers through our feelings and actions. We thought this was an integral part of our transparency and accountability to the study, and we felt compelled to do so before getting to chapters four through eight, where we each shared our counter-stories and examples in depth. Our anchor stories quickly connected readers

with key parts of the story, which permitted readers to know our thoughts, our feelings, and our encounters connected to our topic, spirit-murder.

Courtney Jude - *Beneath the Surface*

When anyone asks me how I felt about becoming the principal of an elementary school, I always refer back to the statement that it was “an answered prayer.” The school, located on the north side of the city of St. Louis, was one of the schools that I was most interested in during my extensive interview process with the district. When I found out I was a finalist for its principalship, I drove up to the school with my wife who happened to have worked there previously for two summers teaching summer school. The large building sat atop a hill on the inside of a neighborhood. It was a massive modern school building that grew over the horizon as you approached it from the main street. The brick building, built in the early 1990s on the former parking lot of an older school bearing the same name (I later learned that the original ‘building’ was a collection of mobile trailers), was meant to be the jewel of the north side, a building that other elementary schools could aspire to be. The school was built with the teachers in mind as they had direct input into the structure. Everything from the closet sizes to the a/c equipment was custom fitted (the latter would become an issue with maintenance during my tenure as we always had to wait extensive amounts of time for parts to be created). I learned that for a while the goal of being the gem of the northside was achieved. There are remnants of its Golden Ages in the trophy cases. You can see former academic and athletic awards, as well as plaques commemorating various past Teachers of the Year award winners. However, due to a multitude of reasons, the academic success had dwindled to that of a low-performing

school. Through word of mouth and documents, I knew about the history, however, what I did not know was the number of things that would need to be addressed underneath the surface.

It is important to note that according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), the national demographics for educators show “79 percent of public school teachers are White and non-Hispanic. About 9 percent of teachers were Hispanic (of any race), and 7 percent were Black and non-Hispanic,” my school had a staff that was representative of its students. A predominant amount of our staff (over eighty percent) were Black. This was a direct representation of the student body because the student demographic was ninety-nine percent African American. Knowing this would lead someone to believe that most practices were in the best interest of the students in attendance. I was quickly surprised as I started my principalship when I found that multiple policies and procedures aided in the spirit-murdering of Black students. For example, I was faced with the notion amongst staff members that if a child does not ‘comply with the rules,’ they need to be sent home, even if it is just for the rest of the school day. The term disrespect was used very loosely and the expectation was that suspension was the only appropriate response. At a school whose data shows that less than twenty percent of students can perform at or above grade level, attendance and time in class are pivotal in achievement. As much as I wanted to approach discipline from a restorative lens, I was faced with the belief that our kids needed a punitive approach.

Moreover, I discovered that the students who had the largest achievement gap seemed to be the scholars who were being sent home most frequently. Before my arrival,

I learned that this was the norm with the previous administration. At times, students as young as first graders were locked out of a classroom during instruction because they did not follow the rules outlined for them. I witnessed teachers who have taken students to the brink of emotional and physical destruction to get them to respond negatively so that a consequence could be given. I learned that there was also a bias when comparing the discipline responses with girls versus boys. This is something that is not just a central theme of my school, but it is also the theme of the nation's schools altogether: it was a place where the most oppressive and repeated offenders of spirit-murdering are those that look the most like them.

Initially, I sought to become a change agent. The leadership staff and I decided to do an optional book study that would attempt to identify gender bias and unfair discipline practices (amongst other things). What I discovered was that the educators who did not need as much training in these areas were the ones who bought in, meanwhile, those who needed it the most did not participate. I then attempted to address these situations head-on with those who needed to improve their practices. However, this was met with opposition and denial. With my efforts stifled, I felt myself slipping into an 'if you can't beat them, join them mentality.' I started to send kids home for not complying with the school rules. I saw myself taking students almost over the edge and pointing the blame at their responses. I stopped trying to address the gender bias in the school. I had conversations with parents about the ramifications if their child did not comply with the rules. I had become the spirit-murderer that I set out to change. I grappled internally with my decisions during that time. In my interview process, I stamped my abilities as a change

agent and an advocate for children, but once the rubber met the road, I found myself caving under the pressures of the school community. To cope, I rationalized it in my mind by thinking of all of the things that needed to be changed and putting other issues (academic outcomes on interim assessments, observation cycles) in front of addressing the unjust discipline. When I wasn't a participant, I acted as if I was blind to the discipline issues. When challenged, I would say things like, "I have to be strategic in the changes that are needed" in order to silence those critics. I was going along to get along. I did not realize that if I had given the attention to being an advocate for those children then it would have had a positive effect on other areas. Our academic outcomes would have improved.

Being the spiritual person I am, I believe in divine intervention. I decided late in the spring of that year to take a half PTO day and visit my mentor principal at her school. I watched as she dealt with multiple student discipline issues that kept the dignity of the student intact. She gracefully created solutions that were beneficial to the students and restored their behaviors. She leveraged her relationship to prompt students to think deeply about their actions. During my time observing her, not once did she send a child home. Visiting her reinvigorated me to lead from the front and do the things that I knew my students needed. I walked away knowing that I was not alone in the issues that my school had and that I had the power to take concrete steps to address the issues within my school.

As we work on our dissertation, our goal is to give clear examples of what spirit-murdering is, as well as provide information so that we can stop it from happening.

I will be intentional by saying that this journey is also something that will selfishly continue to help me stay on the right track and continue to become the leader that my scholars need me to be.

Sarah Guilfoyle - *Finally Understanding the Bigger Picture*

On August 9, 2014, just days before school started, Michael Brown was killed by Officer Darren Wilson just twenty minutes away from where I work, in Ferguson, Missouri. It was very much on everyone's minds when school started that year, including me. As a mother and high school teacher, I felt sympathy for his mother, father, friends, and family who had lost a loved one so young, but as a white, middle-class female raised in the white suburbs of St. Louis County, I also felt like he must have done something to provoke the police officer in the situation to lead to such dire consequences. I tried not to bring it up in class, but like most significant events, they are usually brought up by my students.

That fall, I was teaching freshman English like I have done almost every year of my career. I almost always end the semester with *To Kill a Mockingbird* because it is my favorite book, and I look forward to our powerful class discussions about race, gender, class, education, religion, and justice in America. In late November, when Darren Wilson was not indicted for the killing of Mike Brown, several of my students tried to protest at lunch and were quickly shut down. They returned to class upset and angry that they were not allowed to chant, "Hands up, don't shoot." While I could not explain the administration's choice to stop this, I tried my best to smooth over this situation by saying that people felt very divided because of this event and the protests would only create

more division, and that the best thing we could do was to listen to and support each other, to be the best representative of our race, gender, religion, and humanity in order try to heal. I even tried to connect it to *To Kill a Mockingbird* and how there were several people in the book who were fighting battles to do what was right even though they knew they would lose. I told them the best thing we could do was to keep fighting. What I didn't realize was that I myself wasn't fighting.

Six years later on May 25, 2020, Officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for nine minutes, with Floyd crying out for his mother in his final moments. This clear and blatant abuse of power was also the moment that I realized that not only was this a murder, but so was the situation with Mike Brown. Because I believed in the media and the police, I didn't reach this conclusion immediately. It finally clicked for me that no police officer has the right to be a judge, jury, and executioner. Neither deserved death for their crimes. My inherent racism had allowed me to believe for my whole life that police officers were providing protection for good people and apprehension and removal of bad people. I had been taught this by my parents, my mostly-white community, the media, and my own experiences. It took an egregious act that was so obviously wrong to make me understand this, and I began to understand more deeply the true meaning of white privilege.

In 2021, my family and I visited the spot where George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I felt it was important for not only me to see it, but my sons as well. On the ground where Floyd was murdered, there is an outline of his body spray-painted with cuffed hands and angel wings. Seeing that was a powerful reminder of

his lack of dignity and respect in death. The whole square is blocked off from traffic, and all who were there that day soberly mourned and reflected. There are spray-painted buildings in the square with phrases such as “You are now entering the free state of George Floyd,” “Value Black Life,” and “You Changed the World, George.” I don’t know if his death changed the world, but it did change me.

I have since reflected on the conversation with my students in 2014, and I feel that I let them down in that moment by not supporting them. Then I began to wonder how many other times I had let other Black students down by not truly understanding the bigger picture. I could not see this because, as Terry (1981) states, “To be white in America is not to have to think about it . . . the meaning of being white is having the choice of attending to or ignoring one’s own Whiteness,” the latter of which was exactly what I was doing. Although I knew I was white, I never had to question what it meant because it had never been a problem for me. If anything, it has only been beneficial, from getting out of speeding tickets to getting into college, getting scholarships, and getting out of school debt-free to getting jobs and loans for homes and cars, and I’m sure much more. In 2014, because I could not see my Whiteness, I was not prepared or willing to risk the safety of my job for the respect and dignity of the Black students I was teaching. They deserved an advocate for their education. They deserved a champion for their dignity. They deserve a protector from white people who sought to harm them. They deserved more from me, from someone who cared for and loved them.

It was then that I felt the irony in teaching my students to live by Atticus Finch’s words: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of

view . . . until you climb in his skin and walk around in it” (Lee, 2020). It was easy for Atticus and me as white people try to imagine another person’s point of view because we weren’t truly risking anything. Mentally putting yourself in someone else’s situation is a good start, but empathy only gets us so far. Like Atticus, because I was white, I didn’t realize that empathy and imagining were not enough. It is quite another feat to be a co-conspirator and put my own safety and comfort on the line for my students of color. I knew if I was truly going to become the kind of actively anti-racist teacher I wanted to be, I needed to do some serious soul-searching, extensive research, and step out of my comfort zone to find the source of our societal issues and make changes necessary in myself to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. When the next opportunity inevitably arises, I will be ready to take a stand and use my voice as a white person for the humanity of the Black students I teach; understanding that during the in-between times is when I prepare for this.

Brian Guilfoyle - *Being Part of A Racist System that Tracks Black Students*

As I look back at my teaching career, I can now see both blatant and veiled educational structures of white oppression. I see lost opportunities for the Black students that I taught in a system that tracks children into classes at an early age and creates segregation that is rarely overcome for the rest of their academic course. My career started with teaching middle and high school art in an upper/middle-class suburban school district in St. Louis County. After five years, I switched to a full-time position at an elementary school in the same district and taught art to kindergarten through fifth-grade students. Thirteen years ago, I switched again to a full-time job at the high

school where most of my former elementary students eventually attended. In my twenty-three years of teaching, I have educated students from kindergarten through twelfth grade in visual arts. I have witnessed the rise and fall of the desegregation school program that bussed Black students from St. Louis City to St. Louis County in the name of equal educational opportunity in white society.

With these years of teaching experience, I have gained a unique perspective. I have been a part of a discriminatory system that placed Black students into ESOL and special education classes that replaced or took away time from their fine arts classes at the elementary level. As students transitioned to middle school, my district made it mandatory for middle school students to take music and physical education classes in addition to their core classes. Administrators, counselors, and foreign language teachers encouraged “college-bound” students to take foreign languages because they would get high school credit, and it was implied that students needed four years of a foreign language to attend a college or university. Why were decisions about a student going to college already occurring in sixth or seventh grade? If a counselor, administrator, teacher, or parent decided that the best option for a student was to take a different elective, that automatically put the student on another track. The appearance of course options was a facade. Class options were presented to parents and students, but in reality, Black students were not only tracked into the same electives but were also in the same core classes based on schedule restrictions. In my class schedule, you could see this impact. I taught a Design Arts class which had an enrollment of over thirty students and mainly consisted of minority children, most of whom at that time were part of the desegregation

program. The next hour in my schedule was the same Design Arts course, but it consisted of the “gifted” kids who were predominantly white and Asian, with the class size being around twenty students. Minority students were in overcrowded classrooms, while white students had smaller classes which provided more opportunities for more individualized instruction.

When I switched to teaching at the high school level, students were being pushed into very different classes. Black and low-performing white students were guided into Design Crafts or Design Arts 1, while honors students (mainly white and Asian) took Drawing 1. Sometimes minority students were put into a “lab” for extra help in a core class, but it replaced an elective course. Drawing 1 was only offered by one teacher at certain times of the day, which prevented most minority students from taking the course. For a student to take Advanced Placement Drawing or Painting, they first had to complete Drawing. I realized that several people were the gatekeepers of these students' opportunities in visual arts and other courses. I am part of a racist system that tracked Black students. Darby and Rury (2018) said, “High- and low-track classes do more than deliver different educational content and facilitate access to other kinds of educational and employment opportunities. They also communicate messages about racial and ethnic identity and intellect, and these too often reflect the Color of Mind” (p. 288).

As an art teacher, I am one of the people responsible for recommending students for advanced art classes. Counselors and administrators also play a vital role in encouraging different course options and making schedules work for each child. I feel that students and parents are given limited options because schedules are restricted in our

current structure. If I look at my high school's current enrollment in upper-level art classes, it is obvious that honors students who are majority white or Asian take the Advanced Placement classes offered in the art department. Black students are tracked into introductory courses that administrators, teachers, and counselors look at as an easier option. I can't tell you how many times over my high school teaching career I have encountered a counselor, department chair, or principal asking me if a Black student can get into a fully enrolled introductory class. Is this because there are no other options, or is the introductory course an easy grade option for graduation (not preparing them for college)? Tracking Black students in classes needs to cease. I need to do my part as an educator. I realize I played a part in these white structures that oppress Black students, and the system needs to change. Traditionally students had to take an introductory course to qualify for enrollment into an advanced class, no matter their ability level. I no longer look at pre-requisite courses as the only option for a minority student to take my upper-level classes. If a student has the ability, I ask counselors to forgo the required prerequisite and put the student into upper-level classes that offer college credit. Bypassing classes is something I should have done long ago. Skipping prerequisite classes is not approved, and the department head has reprimanded me for "allowing" minority students into my upper-level classes without the prerequisites. Most people have little knowledge of the vertical alignment that tracks kids from kindergarten through high school. Racial discrimination and white structures in vertical alignment and tracking in visual arts classes are what I have identified and want to correct in my district.

Casetta Brown - *I Do Not Remember the Word, but I Remember How I Felt*

I am not nor have I ever been the type of person to hate someone else. It is not how I think or feel about others, and it goes against my spiritual beliefs. I was shocked and saddened to learn that for the right reasons, I could hate someone. I hated this professor because he thought that he had me figured out, and in doing this, he took the opportunity to perpetrate a very negative experience on me in front of a room full of my peers. It took me a long time to process the feelings evoked within me from our encounter, but eventually, I was able to forgive a person who would never humble himself enough to offer me an apology.

It was the fall semester of 2003, and I was a seventeen-year-old freshman in college. I loved everything about college, meeting new people, the freedom, and becoming a responsible young adult. I was in Stern Hall, slightly tired, but excitedly waiting for class to start! It was an 8:00 a.m. General Education Studies Introduction to Geography class, and I was sitting next to Tabatha, my best friend from high school and college roommate. There were about sixty students in the class, and I knew at least half of them as many of them lived in my dorm, the First Year Center, which consisted of four freshmen residence halls that were all connected to a large eatery and underground convenience store.

I felt comfortable because I was naturally extroverted, so I had already built friendships with many of my peers who were surrounding me. The vibe in the lecture hall was one of fun and anticipation. This caused me to feel confident, eager, and nervous, all at the same time. but it felt good. I felt a naive sense of safety because of campus security

and just being too young to understand the dangers of being in a public space. Oddly enough, none of this mattered, because what would happen on this first day of class shattered my comfort, my feeling of safety, my pride, and just me in general.

Professor Jamison walked into the small lecture hall and the volume immediately quieted. “Please, don’t stop talking on my account,” he attempted a joke. We giggled. He proceeded to introduce himself, review the syllabus with us, and answer any questions we had about the best place to buy his textbooks, our group project at the end of the semester, and how we needed to take advantage of office hours. We then jumped straight into the text and began popcorn reading the introduction and chapter one. When a random student popcorned me, I was ready because I had been following along.

I read aloud my passage, and as I finished up, Professor Jamison interrupted me by loudly exclaiming, “Wow, I cannot *believe* you pronounced that word correctly. It is *rare* for a *student* to get that word right. You *must* be a Linguistics major!” I had given him my eyes when he cut me off, but as he proceeded to speak and emphasize certain words, I started squinting. I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks and my heart began to race. Even if I thought I heard him wrong, his expression appeared to register surprise at my correct pronunciation of the word.

I do not remember the word, but I do remember how I felt. Graves (2017) writes about the wisdom of one of Maya Angelou’s most famous quotes, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel” (p. 1). This was extremely true at that moment because I was deeply embarrassed, and I was hurt. I knew what he meant when he said that no one

ever got that word right; he was talking about Black students, who made up a large part of the college's demographics. I felt so much rage. I wanted to scream at him.

I felt championed by my classmates because many of the ones that I knew, and even the ones that I did not know yet began to advocate for me. A large number of them booed the professor, others made comments in my defense, such as, "How racist," "Oh my God, did he just say that to her," and other statements that involved expletives. It was the high level of emotion from others that grounded me. I did not want anyone else to get into any trouble on my behalf, and if someone had said something directly to him, he would have chalked it up to them being disrespectful because they were Black. I did not want to further perpetuate stereotypes. Even though we were vindicated in our actions and feelings, I still did not want him to win.

I tried to calm others down by keeping my cool. I tried to seem unbothered by our professor's racist ignorance, even though I was definitely bothered. I did this because I did not want to feel like a victim, even though I was grateful for their support. I did this because I did not want to give this white man any further reasons to think bad (or worse) of the Black students that he taught. I sat there, surrounded by a new village that I didn't even know I had or needed; friends, peers, people that I had passed going in and out of my dorm, people that I had made eye contact with, or smiled at as we ordered food in the eatery, or grabbed midnight snacks at the 24-hour underground convenience store. I felt a different type of emotion from this new village, I felt strengthened.

I composed myself quickly, I remembered who I was. I remembered that white people, particularly those in positions of power, did stuff like this all the time, and I had

forgotten that it could happen to me because it had been so long. I remembered that white people, especially teachers, often had lowered expectations for their Black students. In remembering this, I decided that I would be better than him in this moment. I chose to respond by simply stating the facts, “Yes, I am an English major, and that will involve many Linguistics classes, however, I happen to be familiar with the word and its meaning. Thank you.” My tone was not nasty, but I made it clear that his behavior had been noted and that he would be ineffective were he to try it again. Fortunately, it never happened again, and I never took another class with him.

Background Conclusion

As a group, we were all drawn to the idea of studying the psychological impacts of the racism that we faced and took part in. We knew from experience that Black students in particular are often mistreated in schools because of the color of our skin and that this mistreatment weighed heavily on us. We have the emotional scars to prove it. As a group, we knew that this was a part of racist constructs stemming from colonization and we wanted to explore it within our own experiences and practices. Research alludes that this mistreatment causes Black students to show up for school ready to be on the defensive, about everything, instead of learning. Wright-Mair and Pulido (2020) state, “. . . our mind simply survives and tries to get us through the bare minimum- if that; constantly operating under the guise that we are simply not good enough, a result of colonization and white supremacy” (p. 2). Two of us have proven that Black children can either strive to be equipped to face this racialized spirit-murdering daily in a variety of

ways in their schools or fail, resulting in even further damage to their psyche (Wright-Mair and Pulido, 2020). We delved into this much more deeply in our study.

Problem Statement

One of the harshest realities that we have had to face is the fact that we have been a part of the racially oppressive cycle that hurts Black children: all of us are guilty of spirit-murdering students entrusted in our care and classrooms during our career, and two of us actually had our spirits murdered by white educators in our past, and although these experiences were traumatic, we ended up spirit-murdering Black students once we became educators (Love, 2016). We recognized and admitted this was initially scary and difficult, but all four researchers involved in this study feel a strong personal connection to our topic, spirit-murder, and each of us chose to be vulnerable and reflective throughout this research process to ensure authenticity and growth. It allowed us to examine our experiences and use them as research in a way that was intentional, enlightening, and strategic. We each worked diligently to leverage our voices and shared meaningfully. When we shared, we lifted ideas, suggestions, and examples of wrongdoings.

Rationale for Study

“Physical and psychological attacks on Black and Brown children’s bodies and culture are more than racist acts by misguided school educators: they are the spirit murdering of Black and Brown children” (Love, 2019). This study had many purposes; first, we wanted to acknowledge the phenomenon of spirit-murdering of Black students by white educators through autoethnography, which was through our personal narratives

of how we experienced and struggled with this (Ellis, 2004). We chose to elevate the Black voices in our group in hopes of influencing others to reconsider their actions and stop spirit-murdering (McKew, 2020). We accomplished this by detailing a variety of encounters that we have had. We then offered our suggestions, opinions, and ideas for improvement of the experiences of Black children in schools. We did not claim to be experts, but because we did live this as Black students, we definitely felt that we had something to offer to others.

Another purpose for this study that deeply mattered to us was being able to share what led the white teachers in our group to recognize our misbehavior towards Black children as white educators. Even though it was not easy to address, we brought to light what resources guided us along our ongoing, lifelong journey towards recognizing our actions, mindsets, and beliefs that affected the Black students that we taught. We considered past encounters in our classrooms where we might not have spoken up, chose to go along with something that felt right at the time, and many other wrongs that impacted the Black students in our care. It took our program of study, listening and learning, reading, and researching to learn better. We shared this in the hopes of prompting others to see their behaviors for what they are and to reconsider their actions toward Black students.

The ultimate purpose of this study was to seek out this journey towards healing for all four of us researchers, from our pasts to advocating in our futures. As individual educators, we are trying to make sure we never do this again, and we hope that others can identify, more quickly, with what spirit-murdering looks like in the educational setting,

and discontinue these behaviors. Many people don't even recognize it when it is happening, but when we learn what spirit-murdering is, we can do certain things to change this. If this research causes just one educator to better create more culturally affirming spaces for Black children in school environments, then we will feel successful and that our rationale has been fulfilled.

Nicholas (2020) wrote, “Spirit murdering occurs every single day in many of our schools, virtually unnoticed, unchecked, and all in the name of some arbitrary norm created by a white person” (p. 1). Knowledge is power, and if spirit-murdering is hard to see, it will continue to go unchecked and awareness and change might never be a priority. We wanted to impact the current educational climate where spirit-murdering is commonplace because the time is now for antiquated, inconsistent, unreasonable, and unjustifiable school systems created to harm Black students to cease. Our pasts can help.

Significance of Study

This information is extremely important to educators, parents, and stakeholders who want what is best for children. Our study was significant because it speaks directly to how spirit-murdered Black children can overcome and how people who engaged in this behavior in the past can begin to change. The reality is that if spirit-murdering remains consistent, Black children will continue to receive out-of-school suspensions at a higher rate than their white peers, missing instructional time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). This is a major concern for Black students as out-of-school suspensions cause them to miss instruction and to be further isolated from their classroom community. “The Learning Policy Institute and Center for Civil Rights Remedies recently

calculated the unjust disparities in out-of-school suspensions. Across the nation in 2016, Black students lost fifty-one more days of school due to out-of-school suspension than White students” (Love, 2023, 217). “This directly correlates to missed educational opportunities and valuable learning time, which contribute to the already wide learning gap prevalent between students of color and white students” (Gonzalez, 2015). The research shows that Black children have higher Office and Discipline Referrals (ODRs) and that the same infractions are reported significantly less for their white peers. “This is perhaps most geographically evident in school discipline policies, which disproportionately penalize Black students for offenses generally associated with more lenient punishments for whites” (Darby & Rury, 2018, p. 139).

We began our journey into this realm of discovery together in the Fall of 2021. Early on in the *Social Justice* doctorate program, one of our assignments was that we each read an autoethnography from a group of women. In it, the researchers shared personal narratives from their lives and studied how the education system perpetuates and disenfranchises Black children. They wrote specifically about what they felt white educators owed the Black students they taught. White educators and others in the field are responsible for stepping up and doing their part to end this tragic experience that happens to their Black students. It was not created overnight, and so we understand that it will take time to end it, but that does not mean we should tread slowly or cautiously. It is acceptable to be radical in eradicating this traumatic experience for Black students, and we need to start now. It will take a village or all hands to be on deck for an effective change to take root (Boateng et al., 2021).

At the end of their dissertation, they named the implications of their work:

We demand White teachers see their students of color, reducing unproductive and devaluing colorblind ideologies. Educators must be willing to feel discomfort in order to grow in their knowledge of racism and school systems must provide on-going quality professional development related to bias and racism and overall school climate reform. (Boateng et al., 2021, pp. 214)

We, as educators, must be willing to make changes so that Black students experience equitable and best practices in schools that do not cause them harm. This needs to become a basic human right for Black children.

Last, our stories and examples were significant because they were necessary to highlight and note changes within ourselves. They also helped us to understand how racist and controlling school systems hurt two of us individually and the Black students we teach. The stories and examples that we share show us as human and vulnerable. To conduct and write autoethnography, a researcher applies the principles of both autobiography and ethnography. Autoethnography is therefore a method that is both process and product (Ellis et al., 2010). We had to look within ourselves and it helped us to better understand all that is at stake, and in doing this, there should be no questions asked about what needs to be done. Nicholas (2020) asserts:

If we truly want to affect change that is genuine, purposeful, and equity-based, we need to start seeing our students as humans. We need to bring humanity into schools. The whole child must be considered-- from the way we think about and communicate our thoughts to said child and their parents to the policing of their

bodies for the sake of uniformity and safety. From the belief that Black and brown children don't have good character to the systems we implement just for them.

We. Must. Do. Better. Our children, their mental health, and their ability to *thrive* are at stake. (p. 6)

The risks that impact Black children are too great. Change is absolutely possible; it starts with awareness and the internal decision to act. Unfortunately, Black children are not seen as a priority, and their well-being is not valued. Yet, when their grief, anger, shame, and hurt come to the surface, their behavior is misinterpreted as insubordination, and worse: they are suspended from school (Goff et al., 2014). Love (2023) states, “. . . Black students receive significantly more- and worse- disciplinary punishments than their White peers” (p. 232). Last, this study was significant because we anticipated that our experiences may cause others to reflect on their similar experiences and consider change:

Autoethnographers are required to use personal experience to illustrate aspects of cultural experience, making features of a culture familiar to both insiders and outsiders. They are also required to take into consideration ways others may have similar epiphanies in addition to using their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience. (Ellis et al., 2010, p. 4)

Research Questions

We developed four central research questions based on the makeup of our research group. Since this was an autoethnographic study, we needed to ask questions about our personal experiences in and out of the classroom. We wanted a question that spoke specifically to our Black educators who experienced spirit-murdering as students,

that would also highlight how our stories could reduce racially oppressive school systems. The second question was written because the two Black educators also spirit-murdered their Black and Brown students and we wanted to analyze if this could possibly be the result of internalized oppression. Our third question was specifically written for our white educators to allow them the opportunity to describe their spirit-murdering actions toward Black students. The fourth research question allows the two white educators to disclose why they chose to make changes in their educational practices toward Black children. The questions that our study answered were:

1. How does experiencing repeated acts of spirit-murder affect me (you) personally and professionally?
2. Can incidents of spirit-murder between and amongst Black people be an expression/manifestation of internalized oppression?
3. How do white educators spirit-murder Black children in their classrooms?
4. What inspires a white person to confront racism?

Definitions

Critical Race Theory – The Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). CRT is a theory with tenets that support the eradication of all forms of injustice to people, most especially People of Color (POC).

Critical Whiteness Theory - Critical Whiteness is a facet of Whiteness Studies, with its major purpose being the deconstruction of white supremacy and dismantling racial and oppressive structures (Hartmann & Tranby, 2008). This theory is grounded in the concept of white privilege and the ability of white identity to create and maintain power through systems of oppression.

Curriculum Tracking – Legette (2020) describes curriculum tracking as the division of students into classes based on perceived academic ability, which is a common school practice in the USA (Oakes 2005; Tyson 2013).

Murder – unlawful premeditated killing, conclusively defeating opponent, killing with malice, to execute or terminate.

Racism – the prejudice, antagonistic, and discriminating behavior by a person or group of people against a person or people based on their membership in a particular ethnic or racial group.

School Systems – multiple operational structures within a school developed for the efficient performance of the building; i.e.: In-School Suspension (ISS) and Out-of-School Suspension (OSS).

Spirit (Soul) – the essence of being or giving life to, a feeling of cohesiveness and mutual support, energy, life, and character.

Spirit-Murder – In 1987, legal scholar Patricia Williams first conceptualized spirit-murdering as a product of racism which not only inflicts pain but is a form of racial violence that steals and kills the humanity and spirits of people of color. Education scholar, Bettina Love (2016), defines spirit-murdering as the “denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable structures of racism” (p. 2). Love further states: “What I am talking about is a slow death, a death of the spirit, a death that is built on racism intended to reduce, humiliate, and destroy people of color” (p. 2).

Trauma – *ITrauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center* (2022) defines trauma as a pervasive problem. It results from exposure to an incident or series of events that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being.

Whiteness – The standard set by white people through colonization for what was good and right in this world. It is a Europeanized way of viewing beauty, acceptable and appropriate behavior, and other standards with a bias towards others that do not fit within this frame.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter was organized to highlight and provide details pertaining to the literature reviewed by the four researchers of this study. We chose to introduce our conceptual framework: spirit-murder (Love 2016; Williams 1987) first, before our two theoretical frameworks because it was central to understanding exactly why we chose Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023) and Critical Whiteness Theory (CWT) (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2022) to frame our study. As a result, this chapter explored research that illustrated how Whiteness surrounding the context of racist school systems affects Black children in schools by providing an analysis of our conceptual framework: spirit-murder (Love 2016; Williams 1987), both the terms and the phrase. Our qualitative study centered around this concept of Black children experiencing unfair treatment from white educators or other school staff members in positions of power, abusing their authority in ways that caused harm (Wright-Mair and Pulido, 2020). We honed in on this research in this chapter because to fully understand the depth of what spirit-murdering was, the concept of one's spirit had to be evaluated.

Further, this chapter included our research that provided context surrounding our theoretical framework, Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023). The first part of this chapter fully explored the major tenets of CRT to offer a background to how we chose to analyze this theory throughout our study; specifically, how we structured our data as our research through

autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010). In this chapter, we broadened our focus on theory by investigating a second theoretical framework, Critical Whiteness Theory (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2022). We chose both theories because they provided a useful analytical framework for our data as our stories are our data. We chose two different theories because they represented the diversity of our group to frame our data as our research. The two Black researchers used Critical Race Theory to outline their stories or counter-stories (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023). The two white researchers used the theory of Critical Whiteness (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2022) to outline their examples to connect, relate, and write their examples. For these reasons, these theories resonated best with us and the direction in which we wanted to take our study.

The rest of the literature comprised research that gave a bleak look at the traumatic destruction being done to Black and Brown children in educational and other settings (Nicholas, 2020). We wanted to highlight specific research that spoke to the racial violence that takes place during spirit-murdering so that readers could understand the impact on Black children and the ways that it manifests in educational settings. This research elevates the fact that Black students are having their spirits murdered in plain sight. This chapter concluded with a summary of the literature used in this study that provided the framework for how we utilized two theories and a concept to examine how Black students experienced harm caused when spirit-murdered by white educators in classroom and school settings.

Conceptual Framework: Spirit-Murder

The conceptual framework that guided this research is the central phenomenon, spirit-murdering, which is when children of color are taught or led to believe that they are less than others (Wright-Mair and Pulido, 2020). Dumas (2013) speaks of schools being sites of Black suffering: “Racial melancholia, a heavy, deeply-felt awareness of the history and persistence of racial disregard and subjugation, and school malaise, a form of what Pierre Bourdieu has called *la petite misère*, or ordinary suffering” (p. 1). Black children from a very young age learn that they are different from white children, that they are somehow less valuable, and they are taught that their thoughts, skills, capabilities, and futures are subservient and simply not enough (Goff et al., 2014). This damage is substantial and relevant to the development of self-image, psyche, and one’s spirit (Wright-Mair and Pulido, 2020). “Race-centered violence kills Black children on a daily basis by either murdering them in the streets—taking their bodies, or murdering their spirits—taking their souls (Love, 2016, p. 2).

Our focus was how we experienced and engaged in racialized spirit-murdering done to Black students using unfair and controlling school systems, specifically from white educators. Our use of spirit-murder as a concept was proven, but the research is still minimal. O’Connor et al. (2007) state that “race has been undertheorized in research on the educational experiences and outcomes of Blacks” (p. 1). Modern studies have still not produced sufficient data to support all the ways that marginalized children experience trauma and its impact. Unfortunately, this is not surprising because research on Black

topics and experiences would need to be seen as important and relevant for the research to take place. Until it is seen in this light, it will remain an under-researched topic.

Conceptual Framework: Spirit-Murdering as a Phrase

To fully grasp and understand the gravity of this topic and its uniqueness, we needed to first understand the importance of the concept of one's spirit and the word "murder" in the sense that we chose to use it. The term spirit is defined in many ways. The human spirit is distinguished from the separate component of the psyche, which consists of the entities of emotion, images, memory, and personality, as being the mental functions of awareness, insight, understanding, judgment, and other reasoning powers (Helminiak, 1996). The passions, character, and personality are all parts of the human spirit. In this sense, it is the essence of a person in terms of their capacity to gain knowledge and perception. It is one's ability to discern or make accurate judgments of situations well.

In a similar and spiritual sense, one's spirit is defined as the entity within a person that gives them understanding (*New International Version*, 2011, Job 3:28). It can be said that the human spirit is a necessary and vital part of our human form:

Biblical translations of pneuma as 'spirit' could compare with natural air, a pervasive and necessary element commonly observed through the effects of its movement as physical wind or animal sound . . . Biblical spirit, as pneuma in the Septuagint translation of creation, could be compatible with the concept of spirit (pneuma) in *Peri physeōn*, where, as internal spirit (phusa), it was breath for life and health. (Boyle, 2018, p. 100)

Our spirit is often thought to be what drives our creativity, and it is considered to be connected to our souls. One's spirit is defined as "The nonphysical part of a person: the mental, moral, and emotional characteristics that make up the core of someone's identity" (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). With this in mind, a person's spirit is valuable, sensitive, significant, and worthy of protection. If someone's spirit is damaged or if there is harm done to it, the impact could be colossal, transforming their being or who they are.

The word murder, as used in this research, is similar to trauma. The term "murder" is used in this research to describe behavior that is premeditated with malicious intent to damage or defeat one's spirit. It is similar to an attack. The goal is to sever someone's dignity, confidence, and peace of mind while knocking them down emotionally. For example, the goal could also be to kill something that can never really be murdered (damaged), never truly killed or executed. While the white man could murder the Black man's physical body, he could not murder the activist spirit which is what truly threatened him, Williams (1991) states:

A Black man working for some civil-rights cause was killed by a white man for racially- motivated reasons; the man was stabbed thirty-nine times, which prompted a radio commentator to observe that the point was not just murder but something beyond. I wondered for a long time what it was that would not die, what could not be killed by the fourth, fifth, or even tenth knife blow; what sort of thing would not die with the body but lived on in the mind of the murderer.

Perhaps, as psychologists have argued, what the murderer was trying to kill was a

part of his own mind's image, a part of himself and not a real other. After all, generally, statistically, and corporeally, blacks as a group are poor, powerless, and a minority. It is in the minds of whites that Blacks become large, threatening, powerful, uncontrollable, ubiquitous, and supernatural. (p. 72)

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory (CRT)

For this study, we chose to review the literature on two theories that we used for our theoretical framework: Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023) and Critical Whiteness (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2022), because these theories spoke to how we wanted to approach our study. “A theoretical framework is used to limit the scope of the relevant data by focusing on specific variables and defining the specific viewpoint (framework) that the researcher will take in analyzing and interpreting the data to be gathered . . . ” (Sacred Heart University Library, n.d.). With this in mind, we felt that the lens of these two theories would support our research; specifically, each theory was chosen to elevate the researchers' voices for different reasons that were shared later in the dissertation, but first, we must understand what these theories mean and entail.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework with a history dating back to the late 20th century. It was first coined by Derrick Bell, a civil rights lawyer, in the 1970s as a response to ongoing racial inequality and social injustice (Delgado and Stefancic, 2005).

During the mid-1970s, CRT emerged from the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, who were discontent with the slow pace of racial reform in the

United States. CRT originated from the critical legal studies (CLS) movement which failed to address the effects of race and racism in U.S. jurisprudence.

(Hiraldo, 2010)

To further utilize CRT, one must first understand CLS. Critical Legal Studies is defined as “a theory which states that the law is necessarily intertwined with social issues, particularly stating that the law has inherent social biases” (Legal Information Institute, n.d.). Scholars who utilize CLS believe that the law has an inherent power bias towards those who have always been in power and disenfranchises those who have been historically disenfranchised. These theorists also believe that “CLS finds that the wealthy and the powerful use the law as an instrument for oppression to maintain their place in hierarchy” (Legal Information Institute, n.d.). Varying theories, including but not limited to Feminist Legal Theory and Critical Race Theory, are theories that have branched off of CLS (Legal Information Institute, n.d.).

Critical Race Theory has become an educational and societal buzzword of late. Nationwide, state, and national legislators are showing opposition or support of CRT (Ray and Gibbons, 2021). For example, locally in Missouri, there was a proposed bill to ban Critical Race Theory in schools. Opponents argued that “They’re teaching kids to treat people based on their race” (Suntrup, 2023), while supporters like Missouri State Senator Steve Roberts question, “Why wouldn’t we want our kids, our adults, to be educated in this so we can figure out how to address those problems?” (Suntrup, 2023).

Critical Race Theory aims to examine how race and racism intersect with society (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023). “Over

the last 30 years or so, CRT has been successfully applied as an analytical framework to explore matters of race, racialization, and subordination in numerous fields” (Lawrence and Hylton, 2022). According to Ladson-Billings (1998), there are five key tenets of Critical Race Theory, and we chose to focus on them for the purpose of our study: (1) Racism is normal or ordinary, not aberrant, in US Society; (2) Interest Convergence; (3) Race as a social construction; (4) Intersectionality; and (5) Voice or counter-narrative (experiential knowledge) (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998 & 2013).

As a group, we felt that Critical Race Theory directly supported our stances toward the challenges Black children face when being spirit-murdered in schools. Black children face invisibility, or not being “seen,” by their white teachers, and it is completely normal. Black children experience a lack of support, a lack of high expectations being set for them, and a mediocre curriculum being taught to them because that is what the norm is for students who look like them (Malone, Seeberg, & Yu, 2023). CRT seeks to identify the phenomenon of the tenets it identifies, and it gives us the language to talk about the racism that we experience in society; it also provides a framework to understand that race is a social construct. By understanding this, we as a society can educate ourselves and others and mitigate the trauma of racial incidents.

Critical Race Theory begins with the notion that racism is normal in American society (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2013). This first tenet of CRT expresses that racism is permanent, ingrained, and is taught both in subtle and direct ways (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2013). People who benefit from it struggle with

the concept of seeing it. Racism is not random or isolated, but instead strategic and intentional:

Rather, to a CRT scholar racism is the normal order of things in US society. This is the thing that distinguishes CRT scholars from others who investigate race.

Some focus on specific instances of racism or might admit to institutional racism.

However, few outside of CRT would declare that racism is normal. Most argue that racism resides in individual (and sometimes corporate) beliefs and behaviors regarding the inferiority of people of another race. (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 4)

Many white people cannot imagine their lives as anything less or different than how they benefit from the social construct of racism, but those on the opposite end of this privilege recognize this for what it is: unfair and wrong. When something permeates the way we think, and it colors everything we see, it could be difficult to see it as abnormal. “First, racism is ordinary, not aberrational—‘normal science,’ the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023).

The next Critical Race Theory tenet that we used to support our work is Interest Convergence, which is the idea that “White people will seek racial justice only to the extent that there is something in it for them” (Ladson-Billings, 2013). It suggests that meaningful racial progress is more likely to occur when the interests of racial minorities align with those of the dominant group of institutions. In situations where there is not an alignment that also benefits the interest of the dominant group then the dominant group has the discretion to alter the course of racial progression so that it suits their interest. The

idea that white people would only work to support Black people if it benefited them is selfish and hurtful but real and convenient. Interest Convergence purports that Black people achieve civil rights and victories only when white and Black interests converge (Bell, 1980). An example of this is the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*:

The tenet “interest convergence” originated with the work of Derrick Bell (1980), who argued that the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, in which the Supreme Court outlawed *de jure* segregation of public schools, was not the result of a moral breakthrough of the high court but rather a necessary decision: (1) to advance American Cold War objectives in which the United States was competing with the Soviet Union for loyalties in the third world; (2) to quell the threat of domestic disruption that was a legitimate concern with Black veterans, who now saw continued discrimination as a direct affront to their service during WWII; and (3) to facilitate desegregation in the South, which was now viewed as a barrier to the economic development of the region. (Milner et al., 2013, p. 339)

For a person to only support, lift, or move a matter forward because it causes them to win or gain, without intrinsic compassion or morals involved, is the epitome of white supremacy. Doing what is right because it is right, deserved, fair, and equitable for the greater good of all is community in a nutshell, and more importantly, it should interest everyone.

The third CRT tenet is race as a social construct (Ladson-Billings, 2013). It affirms the truth that race is not a scientific reality. This truth is further affirmed by scientists worldwide. For example, Braveman and Parker Dominguez (2021) state,

“Despite extensive scientific evidence to the contrary, there has been a long-standing, widely held, deeply rooted, and unfounded belief that “race,” as reflected by skin color, hair texture, facial features, and other superficial secondary physical characteristics, reflects fundamental biological differences.” Race as a social construct allows for separation and differences to become real in one’s psyche. Critical race theorists believe that although there isn’t a biological difference within the human race, the arbitrary differences that have been established are used to create a hierarchy and ideology of white supremacy (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Intersectionality is a tenet in CRT where theorists acknowledge that individuals hold multiple identities (race, class, gender, ability, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) and that their experiences of oppression (or benefit) are shaped by the intersection of these identities. Intersectionality looks at race as the central focus; however, it also considers how other factors such as gender, class, sexuality, and disability intersect to affect forms of oppression (Crenshaw, et al., 1996). “Black people as a whole, most especially children, are still experiencing the effects of slavery; they are living the afterlife of slavery-skewed life changes, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (Hartman, 2007).

The prevalence of racism is powerful, and it creates a certain race structure that allows for Black people to be judged on a variety of different levels, either through their class, gender, complexion, socioeconomic status, and of course, their race. Thus, perceptions are important. CRT suggests that we consider multilayered identities and status categories to determine how they operate in unison to create perceived notions and

beliefs (Ladson-Billings, 2013). “Critical Race Theory must become an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 4).

The last tenet of Critical Race Theory is the recognition of experiential knowledge, or voice or counter-narrative (Ladson-Billings, 2013). CRT departs from mainstream legal scholarship by sometimes employing storytelling (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Black and Brown people have presumed competence and authority to talk about racism, defend their opinions, and present an alternative viewpoint to others (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Counter-narratives in Critical Race Theory emphasize the importance of listening to and centering the perspectives and experiences of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998). It critiques traditional legal and academic frameworks that have historically ignored or marginalized these voices.

By amplifying marginalized voices, theorists seek to challenge dominant narratives and power structures. Counter-storytelling involves telling stories from the perspective of the oppressed (Miller et al., 2020). These stories challenge the dominant, often white, narratives about race and racism: “The ability to tell that story is important not just as a defense strategy but also as a way to unmoor people from received truths so that they might consider alternatives” (Ladson-Billings, 2013). These counter-stories aim to provide alternative perspectives by highlighting the lived experiences of oppressed communities. In sharing, there is insight gained, and the ability to experience encounters

from a different lens. This is a large part of what is needed to shift mindsets, to overturn decades of racist practices and thinking, and to combat the effects of Whiteness.

These Critical Race Theory tenets (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023) expose how spirit-murdering can occur so naturally to Black students by white educators in positions of power. Racism is normal and acceptable, even in a place that is supposed to be safe for children. Children's families must represent who they are, so judging and behaving in manners that negatively impact them because of where they come from is acceptable. Not being willing to speak up or advocate for a Black child because it does not benefit a white person is simply history repeating itself. Allowing a Black student to speak up and share their side of the story is a waste of time because they will just make excuses and not have anything valuable to share. These false statements are the very reason that Critical Race Theory exists. CRT's work in combating each of these misnomers is critical. Critical Race Theory is about justice, hope, civil rights, and liberation (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023; Mayes, 2026).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Whiteness

Critical Whiteness Theory is a facet of Whiteness Studies, with its major purpose being the deconstruction of white supremacy and the dismantling of racial and oppressive structures (Cullen, 2014). This theory is grounded in the concept of white privilege and the ability of white identity to create and maintain power through systems of oppression. "Recognition that whiteness forms the material, ideological, cultural, and affective centre of the unequal power structure of racism" (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, page xx,

2022). White privilege affects every part of our society. Some of these systems are overt like financial, educational, judicial/prisons, and religion while some are less obvious like the way we think and function as human beings (Nichols, 2010). This limits freedom of choice and access to integral items like healthcare and affordable housing. Schmitt (2021) asserts:

Whites inhabit and move in such places with the ease that stems from the lack of any self-awareness of their bodies, histories, and positions in power - with the ease of the oppressor. The performance recreates whiteness through a combination of various elements: the staging of white education space, the disciplining power of the white gaze, the objectification of Black subjectivity, and the evocation of histories of racial violence that the stereotype has sustained over centuries. (p. 66)

White privilege is ingrained into our way of life and our way of thinking. This racist thought process is something taught to us from a young age. Society teaches us that the “right way” something is done is the “white way” something is done (Collins, 2018).

Helms (1990) discusses Whiteness in *Black and White Racial Identity*:

As long as one has White skin in America, one is entitled to feel superior to Blacks. This sense of entitlement seems to be a basic norm of White society.

Whether or not this initial contact has any implications for racial identity development depends upon the extent to which it is unavoidable. (p. 54)

Even though a white and Black person may grow up in the same town, they will have vastly different experiences. When a white person has contact with Black people

regularly, they may start to notice a difference in experiences happening between races. Helms (1990) describes this stage of development as “Contact”:

As soon as one encounters the idea or actuality of Black people, one has entered the Contact stage of identity. Depending somewhat upon one’s racial familial environment, one will enter Contact with either naive curiosity or timidity and trepidation about Blacks and a superficial and inconsistent awareness of being White. (Helms, 1990, p. 55)

There may be awareness of a white person to the effects of being Black, but they still do not see the privilege held as a white person.

The next stage in white racial identity development is “Disintegration,” which Helms (1990) says, “implies conscious, though conflicted, acknowledgment of one’s Whiteness. Moreover, it triggers the recognition of a moral dilemma associated with being White” (p. 55). Part of this is realizing our history is taught through a white supremacist lens. An example of this is celebrating our country's freedom during holidays. A white person may start to realize that not all people are truly free, acknowledging that white people enjoy the ability to be individuals first, while Black people do not have that luxury. If you are recognized for an achievement, are you recognized for your race first and your individual identity second? This is a consistent form of discrimination in our education system. Educators will start with a white person’s individual identity but start with racial identity if they are Black.

Reintegration is the next stage. Helms (1990) states, “A person accepts the belief in White racial superiority and Black inferiority . . . he or she has earned such privileges

and preferences. Any residual feelings of guilt and anxiety are transformed into fear and anger toward Black people” (p. 57). This is where a white person takes themselves out of an environment around Black people or treats them as inferior. Helms uses the term “justifiable racism” as a way to describe the white person’s thought process. This can be seen in the housing industry when a white person moves into an all-white community from a diverse community to avoid interaction with another race.

Helms (1990) goes on to describe the next stage of White Identity.

Pseudo-Independence is where the positive white identity starts to be developed. She states, “The (White) person begins to actively question the proposition that Blacks are innately inferior to Whites. The person begins to acknowledge the responsibility of Whites for racism and to see how he or she wittingly and unwittingly perpetuates racism” (p. 58). This may not happen immediately or at all for a white educator. It takes time and a willingness to see racist structures that are impacting the Black students and the privilege white people have in our society, knowing that the educational system is causing harm to Black children.

The next stage of development is Immersion, which is not believing in stereotypes and finding the truths in our society, or what it really means to be white in our society and the privilege that comes with the color of one’s skin. Helms (1990) continues, “A person discovers individual self-interest in abandoning racism and acknowledging a White racial identity. Changing Black people is no longer the focus of her or his activities, but rather the goal of changing White people becomes salient” (p. 58). White educators may try to change the Black children in their class instead of embracing who they were and

celebrating their individual identities. Current educational structures lump Black children together while letting white students be individuals. The goal becomes changing white people to recognize these racist structures that need to be changed.

The last stage that Helms (1990) describes is Autonomy:

The person no longer feels a need to oppress, idealize, or denigrate people on the basis of group membership characteristics, such as race no longer symbolizes a threat to him or her. One also finds themselves actively becoming increasingly aware of how other forms of oppression are related to racism and acting to eliminate them as well. (p. 60)

The concept of intersectionality becomes important. There is an indistinguishable amount of prejudiced connections, and research needs to include how different groups of people are being oppressed. This is a never-ending process that requires an open mind for growth.

Helm's White Identity Development is a fluid process, and a person can move between the stages in different ways. Once there is an awareness of society's racist structures, you can't unsee it. As a white person starts to understand some of these structures, they start seeing them all around in every facet of life. White Racial Identity is constantly evolving. Once there is an awareness of these racist structures, it should become one's mission to open other white people's eyes to these racist realities while battling for social justice.

Activists have discussed white privilege extensively and have illuminated the scope to which it impacts our lives. DiAngelo (2021) explores the concept of "nice

racism,” which she defines as a subtle form of racism that is often perpetuated by well-intentioned individuals. DiAngelo contends that this type of racism is just as harmful as overt racism because it reinforces the status quo of racial inequality. DiAngelo says, “Nice racism is the alter ego of overt racism, feeding the need of whites to see themselves as good people immune to the corrupting influence of racism and privilege” (p. 19). James Baldwin (1992) also discussed the concept of the “nice racism” of white liberals as being one of the most insidious and harmful forms of racism.

A white person may say that they do not see color which only perpetuates the idea of white privilege. A person of color does not have the luxury of saying this because the color of their skin impacts the decisions they make for themselves and their families every day. White people are not, however, impervious to the impacts of racism. The centrality of epistemology to white supremacy is comparable to its role in other systemic forms of dominance, such as heteropatriarchy and capitalism. The process of legitimizing certain knowledge, experiences, and voices while marginalizing others contributes to the validation of specific subjects at the expense of denying others full recognition as 'fully human.' The foundational concepts in critical whiteness studies—namely, invisibility, ignorance, and innocence—pertaining to epistemologies of whiteness require reconsideration in the context of the unique conditions of this historical period. While the notion of the invisibility of whiteness as a structural phenomenon has been insightful, challenges arise when incorporating historical context, geographical location, and political dimensions into the analysis (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2022).

White people may choose not to address this conversation because it is uncomfortable, and it takes knowledge, time, and acceptance that harmful acts were and are committed purposefully and without purpose against people of color (Boucher and Matias, 2022, p. 343). This is not limited to the past however; this is a discussion about our present society and the future impacts white privilege has on our children. The presidency and electoral campaigns in the United States serve as symbols of the transformation of Whiteness. This transformation is evident in the adoption and vocalization of a discourse that promotes Whiteness, justifying racist policies. Additionally, new strategies are devised to manipulate narratives that focus on Whiteness and its assumed innocence, all while overseeing the control and harm inflicted upon Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). In a comprehensive examination of Whiteness, it is crucial to identify and denounce instances where white individuals employ a color-blind approach. Repositioning this narrative as a form of evading discussions on race sheds light on the persistent tendency of whiteness to continually assert itself at the center of attention (Boucher and Matias, 2022).

It is also not limited to geographic location. Colonialism is part of world history and most countries around the globe have been impacted (Razack, 2021, p. 43). The spread of white privilege in the name of religion is an important topic that also needs to be broached. In the United States alone, our history of persecution in the name of religion is fundamentally based in white supremacy. Originating from the settler's belief that both Whiteness and Christianity serve as the foundation for claiming entitlement to the land and its resources, contemporary anti-Muslim factions are integral to a broader framework

of right-wing racial politics. This framework encompasses unwavering support for Israel, opposition to abortion, advocacy for gun rights, and strict immigration controls. These pursuits collectively aim to advance and safeguard what is termed "Judeo-Christian values" and a corresponding way of life. The sense of grievance among white Christians is fueled not only by anti-Muslim sentiments but also by racism directed at Black, Mexican, Indigenous, and other groups. These accumulated grievances find political expression as part of a larger narrative (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2022). White supremacists have used religions like Christianity as a path to divide races in the name of a higher entity (Razack, 2022, p. 43). This belief system centers around the thought that if God doesn't want us to be equal, then society should follow his divine law. People of color are harmed by this ideology while whites benefit emotionally and financially.

Critical Whiteness Studies aims to deconstruct Whiteness, racial injustice, and racialized oppression (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2022). Critical Whiteness is an intensely complex and challenging multidisciplinary area of research that centers on the examination of white racial identity within the framework of white supremacy. Over the past three decades, whiteness studies have steadily increased within the field of educational research (Casey, 2021). Whiteness is why CRT exists. Whiteness is racialized oppression. Whiteness is being comfortable disciplining Black students differently from how white students are disciplined. Whiteness is creating conspiracy theories to distract from the truth. Establishing trust in matters of racial justice and Black lives poses a challenge when there is a perceived inability of White individuals to address their own struggles. The recurring pattern of White individuals falling victim to the influences of

Whiteness prompts questions about when they will prioritize self-awareness and seek the truth. Throughout the nation's history, white individuals have been ensnared by the falsehoods of Whiteness, leading to acts of violence against Black people, queer individuals, and people of color. Achieving racial justice in the country hinges on white individuals waking up to the reality that they are being deceived. The falsehoods perpetuated by Whiteness not only harm marginalized communities but also undermine the humanity of white individuals themselves (Love, 2023).

Spirit-Murdering Black Children

Love (2016) outlines how the spirit-murdering of students in schools occurs through racial violence and oppression (p. 2). The racial violence that takes place during spirit-murdering is not the typical, systemic physical behavior done to others such as lynching or being brutally beaten in the streets. Instead, it is the aggressive behavior that directly impacts one's spirit: including their psyche, self-confidence, and ability to hope (Wright-Mair and Pulido, 2020). This process is described as a slow death of the spirit meant to reduce, humiliate, and destroy students of color (Love, 2019). She describes schools as "mirrors of our society," meaning that whatever is happening in schools on a small scale is happening throughout our society at large. Starck et al. (2020) show that although teachers have statistically lower levels of explicit and implicit bias, these differences are negligible and teachers' racial attitudes generally reflect those of the larger society. This is significant because even though they may be working with Black children every day, their racial bias is not changing.

Racism is wrong, no matter the intent. DiAngelo (2021) mentions white people being able to apologize their way through their ignorance by simply stating that they did not mean to be racist; they are genuinely sorry and that others know their hearts. They insist on their intentions being misconstrued. The truth is, this is insincere and privileged behavior that white people use to get them out of uncomfortable situations. The assumption that Black students must feel comfortable in a classroom where their race, culture, and ideals are not the majority could be discomfoting for them. For example, when Black students are told by a surprised white teacher that they are well-spoken, this is an example of spirit-murdering and an encounter with “nice racist” teachers.

“Teachers are, undoubtedly, an important factor, and the influence of the lived experiences of predominantly White teachers and administrators working with an increasingly racially diverse student body needs to be understood” (Carr & Klassen, 1997, p. 3). White teachers and teachers that spirit-murder need to recognize that their ignorance has long-lasting effects on students of color. If they truly care about their students, they will reflect, become professionally developed, and make the necessary changes in their beliefs and practices to remain in positions to educate and influence their students. The emotional impact of these acts may never fade, leaving the students feeling the effects long after they have left the educational system. Each time these events happen in schools, it leaves students of color feeling less included, less dignified, and less human.

These "spirit-murdering" pedagogies use curriculums based on white hegemonic pedagogies and policies, racist teaching practices, and school culture that aim to murder

the spirit, *i.e., human, intellectual, educational, and inner joy* (Hines & Wilmot, 2018). As educators, we need to value the experiences of all students. We need to be aware of the various ways spirit-murder manifests in educational systems, how it affects students, how we each participate in systems that spirit-murder, and how we can impact extensive change. With intention and thought, Dr. Love (2016) provides direction and strategy to guide educators in making cultural changes within schools to better educate Black children.

The consequences of spirit-murder are too dire to ignore as the damage being done is a tragedy. The physical and psychological assaults on the bodies and culture of Black and Brown children transcend mere acts of racism by misguided educators; they represent a form of spiritual violence, a figurative murder of the spirit of these children. While this type of violence may not be as immediately apparent or overtly tragic as physical murders committed by white mobs, self-appointed vigilantes, or police officers targeting unarmed people of color in their homes and communities, or the senseless violence within some Black communities, it nevertheless constitutes a profound manifestation of racism (Love, 2019).

At its highest function, spirit-murdering impedes a person's goals, dreams, and progress toward reaching their full potential. Wright-Mair and Pulido (2021) have found that when students are spirit-murdered, through education and labor that is deemed inferior, impossible or lowered expectations, and presumed incompetence, teaching and learning take a backseat because well-being has been threatened. As Maslow (1943) has proven, after food, water, and shelter, people need safety and belonging. Students cannot

exhibit learning behaviors if their basic need for emotional safety is going unmet. Hines and Wilmot (2018) establish three main strata for spirit-murder: anti-Black microaggressions, anti-Black institutionalized racism, and anti-Black macroaggressions. Racial microaggressions are “brief, commonplace, and daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and indignities directed toward Black Americans, often automatically and unintentionally” (Sue et al., 2008). Racial macroaggressions are large-scale systemic forms of oppression that affect all the members of a race (Gorski, 2014). Institutionalized racism, such as what is found in schools, is a form of macroaggression.

Public classroom shame and exclusionary discipline are standard practices in classrooms across this country. Both are used to break the spirit of students of color. There is much research on the effects of shame and how it is used in teaching practices. Andre M. Perry (2022) examines how “shaming is the worst method of teaching” because it leaves students feeling alienated and disenfranchised. This can lead to withdrawal due to embarrassment or acting out due to anger, neither of which is conducive to further learning. It can be extremely difficult for adults to excel when they are feeling low, yet Black children are accountable and held to higher standards even when and right after they are spirit-murdered. These racist acts can negatively impact children of color by causing them to lose their sense of cultural identity, feel less confident in their own abilities, have fewer aspirations and hope, and experience a rise in dropout, suspension, and expulsion rates as well as a decline in academic achievement (Spencer 1998).

Black students are in danger. They are not safe. They are not able to make mistakes, take risks, or be vulnerable within their classroom environments, which is what is needed for real learning to occur (Goff et al., 2014). It is almost impossible to do one's best to survive these encounters every single day without it beginning to take a toll on who you are, what you think about yourself, and what you start to believe about yourself. Though the damage is internal and invisible, it is still very harmful. Emotional wounds can take longer to heal. The mental anguish Black students constantly feel begins to erode what has been instilled. This racial discrimination has been linked to several outcomes relevant to Black adolescents' success in school, including declines in grades, academic self-efficacy, lack of school utility values, and decreased school bonding (Leath et al., 2019). Further, "stereotype-based treatment and overt harassment may undermine Black students' personal sense of value and belonging in the academic context, increasing the likelihood of school disengagement" (Leath et al., 2019). A spirit that is consistently murdered leads to the death of dreams and hopes, creativity, positivity, joy, and so much more. Black children deserve better.

In a further review of the current literature, we also found correlations of exclusionary discipline being used to spirit-murder Black students. Klevans (2021) explores the growing recognition of the negative outcomes of retention, suspensions, and expulsions. While some schools are beginning to acknowledge these harms, most are still perpetuating the same old practices. Research tells us that Black students are kicked out of class and suspended at alarmingly higher rates than their white classmates. The National Center of Educational Statistics (2021) reports that in 2020, 36% of Black

students were retained in the same grade, while only 18% of white students were held back. The same source states that in 2017-18, while 3.42% of white students were suspended from school, the rate for Black students was much higher at 12.3%. As for expulsions, .15% of white students (34, 302 students) were expelled compared with .49% of Black students (37, 051 students). Despite all we know about suspension rates, this is still happening.

Research demonstrates that a statement made by a Black female student can be seen as angry and vulgar, while a white female can make the same statement and it can be seen as her advocating for herself (Sue et al., 2008). A Black male student can approach a teacher's desk and it will be described as a hostile experience, while a white male student can do the same and it is simply a scholar seeking clarity: Black girls in schools often face discriminatory labeling, with teachers characterizing them as defiant and disruptive, using terms like 'loud,' 'aggressive,' and 'combative.' These labels are typically applied when their behavior deviates from white, mainstream femininity norms, which prioritize traits like passivity and quietness. Additionally, these girls are more prone to disciplinary actions for not conforming to these norms. In summary, both Black boys and girls encounter discriminatory treatment in their everyday school environments, although the frequency and nature of these experiences may differ between gender groups (Leath et al., 2019).

White children sitting together is common, but when Black children sit together, they need to be separated (Mayes, 2016). White students walking in a large group are considered to be a "collection" of students, while a large group of Black students walking

together is considered to be a “gang,” and is the cause for nervousness and anxiety (Goff et al., 2014). The disparities are endless and the effects are immeasurable yet the “track” records remain and show discriminating behavioral data and trends within schools. Darby and Rury (2018) explore the racist strategy of tracking. Tracking is used to specifically and strategically exclude students from academic opportunities as well as send the message of inferiority to students in “lower” tracks (Culpepper-Orofi, 2012). It does not take much analysis to discover that Black students are the majority of students who are deemed “lower.” Research shows how schools use toxic and devaluing language to describe Black students. Nicholas (2020) writes that using terms like “rap sheets,” “repeat offenders,” “disruptive,” and “defiant” equate our children to prisoners, further perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline.

While many vehicles of the spirit-murder of Black students are easy to spot in classrooms, research tells us others are not as easily identified. Wilson (2021) discusses a hidden curriculum “that illuminates the ways that schools reinforce social norms and reproduce oppression” (p. 51). These are the implied rules that many students are not aware of when entering schools. These untaught social and cultural expectations teach all students what is accepted and what is not. Unfortunately, it is difficult to change the negative perceptions of Black students if these pervasive hurdles are never truly discussed. Recognizing these forms of spirit-murdering is only one step in making change within our schools.

There are many other steps that we can take to make comprehensive changes: transforming our language and mindsets, empowering students, and offering more

autonomy could revolutionize our schools. One potential method for combatting spirit-murder through language is nonviolent communication (NVC). Rosenberg and Chopra (2015) present how nonviolent communication can transform the way we talk to our students and also how we think about them. NVC changes our language from defensive to compassionate, a word that comes up often when researching solutions to spirit-murder.

Restorative practices are becoming more utilized and the research is showing its benefits. Klevans (2021) explains how restorative practices build community within a school and allow for mediation, reflection, and making amends. These practices call for not only accountability, but also the inclusion of all students, faculty, and staff.

Wright-Mair and Pulido (2020) explain that decentering whiteness will allow schools to focus on spirit-healing practices instead. Decentering whiteness is critical in these endeavors.

Boateng et al. (2021) call for educators to sit in a place of discomfort with racism and acknowledge how it affects our school systems. This may come through mandated professional development or an individual's personal reflection. We hope that, through our research, we can see how we are currently participating in spirit-murdering and how we can develop strategies to end these practices. Because this subject is so deeply woven into the curriculums, policies, and structures of schools, we understood the need to explore the many variables associated with and the consequences for Black students' lives as they leave educational systems.

The Dangers to Black Children

The spirit-murdering of Black students damages their psyche, and whether or not racists are aware of this, the outcome is the same (Wright-Mair and Pulido, 2020). We know this because we have lived these truths. Our life stories are examples of the mental and emotional damage that is done by racially oppressive school systems. Black students face this daily in their classroom environments:

It is not that dark children do not have grit and zest, but they need educators and their communities to protect it, not measure it. Sadly, this is easier said than done in an environment of injustice, profit from oppression, and quick fixes. (Love, 2020, p. 86)

Now is the time to call for justice for all the wrongdoing in schools towards Black children and their families. It has been time. We need to call for something that has been requested and determined as the only fair way to successfully elevate beyond the past that was thrust upon us. It is time to demand educational reparations. Reforms are employed as a means to hinder Black progress, with systemic challenges preventing advancements while disproportionately impacting Black communities. This ongoing process, perpetuated by powerful entities often described as super predators, systematically erodes opportunities, diminishes public services, and divests from community-strengthening initiatives and job creation. At its most severe, it results in the death and incarceration of Black individuals. These are the truths and lived experiences of Courtney and Casetta.

The concept of reform capitalizes on the aspirations of living beyond the predetermined conditions imposed on the Black community, yet those who fight for

justice often find themselves penalized. Considering the profound impact of an education system characterized by violence and deprivation on Black children and their families, questions arise about what is owed to them. To redress the harm inflicted over the past four decades, there is a clear call for educational reparations. This entails acknowledging and addressing the historical injustices embedded in the education system and actively working towards rectifying the resulting disparities (Love, 2023).

Black students need people advocating on their behalf and we are doing this with our study because racism is common and ordinary, making schools mentally and emotionally dangerous for Black students. For Black students, schools have swiftly shifted from being places of pride, culture, and community to spaces of trauma (Mayes, 2016). Schools are not safe havens for Black children, and will never be this as long as racially oppressive mindsets, behaviors, and school systems exist. If Black children are surrounded by white teachers, white social workers, counselors, coaches, referees, and administrators, and none of them ever take the time to invest in them, they don't encourage them, or speak "life" into their spirits after they have been spirit-murdered for so long, how are they ever supposed to achieve greatness? Critical Race Theory is designed to help people make sense of the racism experienced. Its tenets can be used to assist advocates who wish to lessen the negative effects of racism on Black children (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023). CRT is designed to study how society allows for racialized oppression, and then, dismantle it (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023). Love

(2023) offers an example of how Black students don't always find advocates in the white people around them in educational settings:

I went to see my athletic academic advisor, Mr. Robert . . . When I asked Mr. Robert if I could change my major to education, he answered bluntly and without hesitation, 'You are from the inner city and went to an inner-city school. You are here to play basketball.' I didn't know how to respond to him. And I began to wonder if it was too late for me to take school seriously. I questioned my intellectual right to be there since my SAT scores were low and I hadn't done any advanced coursework in school. I left his office deflated. (pp. 5-6)

It is regular and expected when Black children are judged for being tardy or accused of misbehavior and never given the chance to share their side of the story or give an explanation of what happened. The idea behind this is that they are just going to lie anyway, they are guilty, or they are not worthy. Black children are being spirit-murdered in plain sight (Goff et al., 2014).

Summary

Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023) and Critical Whiteness (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2022) provided the framework for how we examined the traumatic damage done to Black students in educational settings by white educators. We used our theoretical frameworks to limit the scope of ourselves as research and share our stories to help others grapple with and attempt to impact change regarding the spirit-murdering of Black children (Sacred Heart University Library, n.d.). To use CRT as a framework for educational

equity, we acknowledge racism in the classroom and offer innovative ways to address it (Ladson-Billings, 1998). We did this in a variety of ways using our stories, epiphanies, encounters, and examples to delve into our lives as the research (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010).

It affords scholars an opportunity to articulate their stories and provide the personal perspective of people of color to research. CRT provides the public with a different written historical perspective to expose history, question the rules, and provide opportunities to right the wrongs of the past. (Brown, 2018, p. 32)

Critical Whiteness Theory is a topic often broached when discussing Critical Race Theory and Whiteness Studies. Whiteness studies' major purpose is the deconstruction of white supremacy and the dismantling of racial and oppressive structures (Cullen, 2014). Critical Whiteness Theory is the analysis of these structures of racial power as a social construct and their impact throughout the world over time. Allen's (2004) concept of Whiteness revolves around privilege and identity which creates these racial power structures. In a framework of white supremacy, white individuals not only enjoyed tangible advantages but also received psychological benefits from perpetuating a racialized system. This system transformed the United States into an opportunity structure for European ethnicities who, in turn, were assimilated into the category of "white." The implication is that meaningful social and economic changes were unlikely to transpire unless white individuals actively addressed the role of their own racism, which hindered the development of cross-racial solidarity. The recognition and

confrontation of internalized racism among whites were seen as crucial prerequisites for fostering a more equitable and unified society (Allen, 2004).

Spirit-murder is all of the ways that marginalized students are made to feel like second-class citizens. This traumatic experience occurs every time students are robbed of their humanity, whether it happens intentionally or accidentally (Williams, 1987). The scars from the spirit-murdering of Black students through racist and controlling school systems cause substantial damage. This racial violence is not physical, and yet the damage is just as powerful, as it goes beyond physical pain. Its impact affects one's psyche, confidence, and ultimately their spirits, potentially long term. If this phenomenon is never addressed, it will continue, only getting worse (Wright-Mair and Pulido, 2020).

It will require everyone to take accountability for protecting our children, most especially our Black students because it is our collective responsibility. To be clear, this is not a "Black people problem," as Black people did not create this; regardless, this is a problem for everyone. In *Nice Racism*, DiAngelo (2021) talks about why she specifically writes to white people:

I write books and articles specifically as a white person to white people. My goal is to help us get out of denial about our racism and be less harmful to Black people and other people of color. If I didn't think that was possible, I couldn't continue. We are capable of doing better. (DiAngelo, 2021, p. xiii)

In his dissertation, Brown (2010) writes about the traditional morning greeting of the Masai Warriors in Africa in juxtaposition to how Black students in America are not well. Masai Warriors often pass each other in the morning and use a greeting known as

the *Kasserian Ingera*, and in this greeting, they ask, “And how are the children?” The appropriate and common response is, “The children are well.” The idea is that if the children, the ones who will lead their world someday, are well, then all else will be well (p. 1). Unfortunately, in America, the children are not well, and they haven’t been for some time. Black children, especially, are absolutely not well, and they never will be if they continue to be spirit-murdered.

In *The Sum of Us*, McGhee (2022) mentions the solidarity dividend as gains made when people come together across races and how it could benefit all people. One’s winning is dependent upon another’s winning and vice versa. In winning together, we gain access, resources, equity, and so much more. There are no wins taking place in isolation, as it is the collective whole’s gain to grow and become better; when someone else fails to act in a manner that would benefit the collective whole, it then becomes a collective failure. We fail ourselves, and others when we only look out for ourselves, considering our own needs, and not those of the group. We are stronger together than we are apart. When we come together to unite and act as a village, our children benefit as opposed to when we operate in isolation. Our children experience the effects of this failure often enough, and it is time for Black students to stop paying this price. If only we could move towards this thinking, we could change the world. This is an authentic truth that we cannot help but hope for as progress is made.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, we outlined how we chose to leverage our collective voices and experiences using the qualitative method of autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010) to further the study of our conceptual framework: spirit-murdering. Each member of our group had different vantage points of spirit-murder in education where we either experienced it ourselves as students, witnessed it taking place towards other students, or were a part of the system directly as a teacher that perpetuated the behavior that harmed students, or a mixture of the three. This was a harsh but honest reality and one that was intriguing enough to study and research for three years. Through continued discussions, we ultimately decided to focus our qualitative research on how racist school systems caused us to become spirit-murdered; and how we allowed oppressive school systems, misguided thinking, judgments, and biases to murder the spirits of Black children.

This concept has existed in society since white people allowed Black students to attend integrated schools and continues to plague Black children over 100 years later (Givens, 2022). Spirit-murdering is defined by legal scholar Patricia Williams (1987) as racism (that) is more than just physical pain; racism robs dark people of their humanity and dignity and leaves personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries. Spirit-murder is all of the ways that students are made to feel like second-class citizens. Two of the researchers did specifically speak to this and the level of trauma and shame that persisted throughout this, while two of our researchers spoke to acts committed against Black students that caused spirit-murder. This traumatic experience occurs every time we rob

students of their humanity whether we are doing this intentionally or accidentally. It is when children of color are taught or led to believe that they are inferior (Love, 2023).

Spirit-murdering has always been a part of education, dating back to when slaves were not allowed to learn how to read. They had to hide their learning within their homes and plantations. Spirit-murdering is also when Black students are taught or led to believe that they are second-class citizens. It is the opposite of Cultural Responsiveness, when teachers welcome students' cultures into their classrooms, though, this does not happen often enough.

Creating and becoming safe havens for children is one of the best ways to combat spirit-murdering within schools. Love (2023) states:

As an adult, I now recognize that my house was more than just a party house on those Saturday nights. It was a sanctuary, a place of refuge, a space that demanded that pain and trauma be left at the door and replaced with Black joy. It told me who I was and gave me confidence in who I could be. It was a space where we could celebrate ourselves. Celebrate our music. Celebrate our community. It was a space where Whiteness was not invited or even acknowledged . . . Black joy is ours; it is our refusal to give Whiteness our emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental lives . . . Those nights at my house, Whiteness was nowhere to be found; my house was an emancipatory space of Black joy. (p. 232)

The reality is that Black students' spirits are murdered every time a teacher embarrasses them in front of their peers; when they are told to change their hairstyle so that they better fit into the mainstream culture of the school body, when Black students are separated

from their peers in the classroom to limit communication, or when they are sent to In-School Suspension (ISS) at higher rates than their white peers (Love, 2016; Love, 2019; Love, 2023). As a result, they enter into a daily mode of survival as students. Love (2020) describes this as:

A life of exhaustion, a life of doubt, a life of state-sanctioned violence, and a life consumed with the objective of *surviving*. Survival is existing and being educated in an antidark world, which is not living or learning at all. (p. 39)

Anchor Stories Introduction

We chose to include short anchor stories here because we grappled with whether to leverage autoethnography as our methodology for months. We often brought the topic up and talked ourselves out of it. There was so much discomfort, fear, and many other mixed emotions that we did not want to face or address. Ultimately, when we decided to write autoethnographies, there was angst and elation. The following vignettes further detail how each researcher specifically felt about the bold change so late in our program.

Courtney Jude

When our dissertation group initially started to narrow our focus, there was a collective thought process of using interviews with colleagues we know so that we could collect data on how they have been spirit-murdered. As we have researched, written, and explored, we have (with the assistance of our advisors) decided that a more authentic experience for not only our group but for our addition to the work within spirit-murdering would focus on our own stories. Initially, within this change, I experienced both feelings of excitement and apprehension. I was excited to be able to explore my experiences of

dealing with spirit-murdering in multiple stages of my life. However, with the makeup of our group, I was apprehensive because I did not want the reader(s) to view my white teammates as being anything but authentic in their writing. However, as we have grown in our exploration of our own stories, I have seen that our group has the ability to share our stories as Black educators and share the stories as white educators as exposure concurrently.

Sarah Guilfoyle

Going into the research process, I was nervous and excited to interview my co-workers about their own experiences with spirit-murder. I was curious how many people would be honest with me about the harm they have caused Black students throughout their careers, but also hopeful about how their stories might help other white teachers to examine their behavior. When we eventually decided to do autoethnography, I felt conflicted. Our mentors have even discussed that they disagree about whether white people should do autoethnography, so I had never considered this as a possibility. In my mind, I had envisioned myself hearing the stories of other white educators and analyzing them while allowing them to remain anonymous. This was a huge mental shift for me because it would be much more difficult now that I would have to turn the magnifying glass on myself. I would have to look at my behavior, and then analyze, and immortalize it in writing for anyone to see. What would my friends, family, and co-workers think? Would I be shunned or even fired for my honesty? Would my courage to speak the truth be necessary or helpful to anyone? Ultimately, I thought sharing my journey from a young, inexperienced new teacher, to a seasoned, experienced educator could help other

white teachers examine their behaviors and be more likely to interrupt the cycle of white supremacy in the classroom. I hope it could help Black students feel validated in their experiences if I admit what I did and acknowledge the harm I caused.

Brian Guilfoyle

As a visual arts teacher, I have always enjoyed telling other people's stories through photojournalism. When our cohort began this journey, we discussed interviewing other people, which felt comfortable and exciting. As we discussed changes to our process and the focus became our own stories and history with spirit-murder, it became more difficult because of self-examination and putting my experiences into written form. No longer did I have an outside-looking-in perspective. Now, I am the subject and am telling my truth. I do not have a lens as a barrier to protect me. My whiteness and privilege are the story; I used this to harm Black children in my classroom. I struggled with the concept of autoethnography as a white male. My story of privilege has written most of the history of this country. I did not want it to sound preachy or inauthentic to the struggles of others. The telling of my past was an effort not to repeat it, and I hope to inform others so they can grow and learn, as I am continuing to do. My ambition is to help expose white spirit-murder and not make this research seem like therapy for white people.

Casetta Brown

When I first heard about this program and how it was set up, I was excited to work within a cohort to study *Social Justice*. I do well when working on my own, but the thought of doing this program alone was terrifying. The process of getting into our

groups was intense and interesting, but I was pleased with how it all turned out. This research group and I have worked hard to cultivate friendships with each other and I would not have chosen to complete this program any other way. With that in mind, when the idea of completing autoethnography as our methodology was mentioned, I immediately got excited. How awesome would it be to write from my own personal experiences dealing with spirit-murdering. Then, when two members of my research cohort shared that this would make them uncomfortable and that it might not feel as authentic, I immediately shifted my thinking back to the idea of interviewing others to make sure that we did what was best for our group. We care so much about each other, that how we might feel throughout this journey mattered to each of us. After two years together and in our second to last semester of class, we decided to write an autoethnography for our research. Initially, I had mixed feelings because I wanted to make sure that no one felt forced to do this. I also felt happy. Ultimately, I know that our work is an authentic reflection of our research, our accountability to each other, and our truths.

Research Design

In our autoethnography, we wrote retrospectively and selectively about epiphanies on topics that resonated deeply with us (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010). Throughout our program, we have discussed the importance of story-telling, especially for marginalized voices. We also decided that between the four of us, we had enough experience with spirit-murder to turn the focus on ourselves for our research. Autoethnography allowed us to share the stories of our Black team members and their experiences with being

spirit-murdered, while also allowing our white team members to offer examples of how and why they have caused spirit-murder. Ellis (2004) asserts, “Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that display multiple layers of consciousness” (p. 37). We hope that our personal stories can connect with those in education and maybe even outside of it, as spirit-murder is not limited to schools.

We are fortunate to have a mentor who understood what we wanted to convey even when we were getting confused by it. In the fall 2023 semester, we finally decided to accept, lean into, and embrace writing an autoethnographic study. This ethnography study directly aligned with our collective passion in our daily work. The unique intersectionality of our racial makeup, mixed upbringings, gender, and our personal encounters and examples were important for us to share as it strengthened our analysis and understanding of this research, and it deepened our commitment to impacting change in a world that constantly hurts Black children in school settings. While we all have differences, we did share the commonality of being K-12 educators who aim to be social justice advocates for Black students because we recognize that it is an absolute necessity, even as we have had to be accountable for having witnessed, being complacent, and/or engaged in spirit-murder at some point in time.

Research Questions

We developed four central research questions based on the makeup of our research group. Since this was an autoethnographic study, we needed to ask questions about our personal experiences in and out of the classroom. We wanted a question that

spoke specifically to our Black educators who experienced spirit-murdering as students, that would also highlight how our stories could reduce racially oppressive school systems. The second question was written because the two Black educators also spirit-murdered their Black and Brown students and we wanted to analyze if this could possibly be the result of internalized oppression. Our third question was specifically written for our white educators to allow them the opportunity to describe their spirit-murdering actions toward Black students. The fourth research question allows the two white educators to disclose why they chose to make changes in their educational practices toward Black children. The questions that we wanted this study to answer were:

1. How does experiencing repeated acts of spirit-murder affect me (you) personally and professionally?
2. Can incidents of spirit-murder between and amongst Black people be an expression/manifestation of internalized oppression?
3. How do white educators spirit-murder Black children in their classrooms?
4. What inspires a white person to confront racism?

Participants

In an effort to share our experiences and our journeys, the only participants in our autoethnographies were the four researchers who made up this cohort, as we chose to use ourselves as the research (Ellis, 2004). We thought it would be an authentic approach to reflect on our actions, practices, beliefs, misguided judgment, and even our failures as educators. We each chose to write specifically to listen, reflect, and learn from the analysis of our own troubled experiences with spirit-murder. The ability to grapple with

what was uncovered has been a grief-filled and healing process at the same time. The design of this ethnography type is called narrative autoethnography, and it was the fitting research design for our group because we had already begun writing anchor stories to detail our experiences and truths throughout this process.

Our dissertation was designed to captivate readers by sharing what we have encountered in a very honest way. By using techniques of showing, autobiographers can make texts visually appealing and evocative. These techniques are intended to immerse readers in the scene, especially in the thoughts, feelings, and actions necessary to fully experience the text (Ellis et al., 2010). We had to embrace this, even those of us who experienced spirit-murdering, had to admit that it is scary to be so vulnerable. We re-experienced past traumas that embarrassed us and caused us pain, and turmoil. We chose to write these things because there is beauty and growth in acknowledging the experiences and sharing the encounters. There was also the fear of being seen as victims, but we pushed through these emotions in hopes of helping others.

There was a great fear of sharing what we have done to Black children, which caused vulnerability to this writing experience. The fears, the honesty, the shame, and the judgment, all of these feelings were terrifying, but we thought that it was the right thing to do. When Ellis (2004) is asked what gives her the courage to write difficult stories that may cause judgment from others, she states, "I just figure that other people have experiences similar to mine . . . and that I'm not the only one who has suffered or had tough decisions to make" (p. 34). So here we are, persisting beyond our emotions, not because we are heroes, we are not. We are persisting because we believe in the change

that is needed and the changes that can be made in others through starting a conversation.

Ellis (2004) goes on to say:

I want my stories to generate conversation, so I tell myself that any response is a good thing. You learn about others from it, and about yourself from how you take it in. It's hard to do sometimes, but if you can't get outside your experience to get into others' experience of your experience, then you're too self-absorbed . . . it's self-absorbed to pretend that you are somehow outside of what you study and not impacted by the same forces as others. It's self-absorbed to mistakenly think that your actions and relationships need no reflexive thought. To write about the self is to write about social experience. (p. 34)

We know that although we are researchers, we were also part of the experience so instead of studying others, we all chose to look at ourselves first because we have all harmed others and we have been harmed. These experiences impacted us and played a role in our interactions with others, whether we were aware of this and doing it consciously, or subconsciously. As Dr. Love (2023) stated:

Over the years, I have come to appreciate that being a co-conspirator is also understanding how we all harm people; how, as a society, we are obsessed with punishment, and how we fail to take accountability for the harm we have caused because of shame and fear of loss of community. Being a co-conspirator is not just about the outward work of fighting White supremacy—it is about the inward work of fighting White supremacy—it is about the inward work of repairing and healing ourselves to do less harm in the world. (Love, 2023, p. 245)

Ethics

In an effort to protect and respect the identities of other people, schools, and institutions that play a role in our stories and examples, we have changed the names of all involved (Ellis et al., 2010). To help us remain focused on our work, our storytelling and examples, and our purpose, we still used accurate descriptions of other people in terms of their gender and race, and of settings. In this way, we remained true to the experience and focused on highlighting our actions, emotions, and thinking, rather than focusing on the other people involved. For example, a first-year white teacher and mentee that one of us mentored was still described as such, simply, his name and the school where the encounter took place were changed and the detailed encounter(s) took priority.

Setting/Site

The racial makeup of our four researchers and our different settings made for very authentic and vulnerable research and encounters. This allowed for different behaviors to be accepted, tolerated, championed, supported, and discouraged. Two of us work in predominantly white and suburban school districts, while the other two of us work in urban schools that both have a majority Black student population. We were descriptive in our counter-stories and examples to ensure that readers could visualize, and understand the nature of what we were choosing to share:

Stories provide the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting.

The ahistorical and acontextual nature of much law and other ‘science’ renders the voices of dispossessed and marginalized group members mute. In response, much of the scholarship of CRT focuses on the role of ‘voice’ in bringing

additional power to the legal discourses of racial justice. In our descriptions, we will work to protect ourselves as employees of public and/or charter school districts, while remaining authentic, legitimate, and appropriate. (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 8)

Many of the anchor stories served as counter-narratives that happened while we were in schools in different states and at different grade levels, including elementary school through to college. When describing these spaces, we were certain to include the demographic information needed to ensure understanding and connectivity to the experience being shared. When discussing our college experiences, we incorporated pertinent information while not being overly sensitive to a person or place that allowed spirit-murdering, but wrote with sensitivity to others' ignorance in perspective of our growth. This means that we did not degrade people and places even if the situation took place, but we were honest.

Researcher's Role

Our role as researchers in this study was to be honest and transparent to elevate Black voices to reshape mainstream narratives and history being told (or banned) about Black experiences with racially oppressive systems within schools. Our role was to share what we needed as Black students who were being spirit-murdered, how we overcame and continue to overcome, how we are still enduring, and how we operate as educators in the same racist systems to support Black children. Our other role in the research study was to be honest in sharing horrible things because white teachers need to know that their journey to becoming a safe haven for Black children starts with internalizing their

behavior, we were willing to shift their mindsets, we were open to transformation, and were enabled to take these first steps. We all stepped outside of our comfort zones and were accountable for the storytelling. We chose and accepted the inevitable vulnerability and honored the process of the research. We took these roles very seriously as we were invested in the work and purpose of our study.

Data Collection/Analysis

Our data that was collected was our experiences. We each wrote from our own perspectives, and we got to tell our stories. This might seem easy to some, but already, the process has been an experience that involved much trauma and guilt in a variety of ways. In researching ourselves, we did not have to request permission from the Institutional Review Board because we had permission to research ourselves. We entered this research design sort of understanding the possible outcomes and damage to ourselves, but we did not fully grasp these concepts until we were safely on the other side of it all. Our norms included being safe havens for one another, being completely honest with each other, and pushing each other to reach our full potential.

As mentioned as a limitation, we held each other accountable for owning our actions and sharing our experiences. Courtney and Casetta chose to write from their experiences, both as students and as educators, as previously mentioned before. These stories are a part of Critical Race Theory and will be called "Counter-Narratives/Stories" and storytelling. Brian and Sarah, as previously mentioned, chose to write from different situations where they have engaged in our conceptual framework as perpetrators. Their stories will be called "Examples." These terms will all be referred to as anchor stories

from our memories and will include detailed synopses that speak to what transpired both in the moment and after. The self-introspection is examined using narrative analysis, which is an analytic technique used to interpret the world, and thematic analysis, which is “treating stories as data and using analysis to arrive at themes that illuminate the content and hold within or across stories” (Ellis, 2004, 196). Our data or stories reflected our initial thoughts and actions at the time of the encounter and the reflective processes that took place afterward that have helped us to grow; leading each of us to this current point in our lives.

Trustworthiness

Our research is important to us and we have mentioned integrity before, but it is also relevant within this context. We did our absolute best to remain true to ourselves, the situations, and the others involved by being worthy of trust because we were being honest. Our professionalism and the purpose of this study allowed us to be reliable resources to aid the movement and progress of combating the spirit-murdering of Black students. There was no intention to embellish or downplay our anchor stories. “I tell this story both because storytelling is a part of critical race theory” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 3). We told our stories to share and reflect, but it is also a part of the structure of Critical Race Theory. In telling our stories, we remained true to the events and ourselves in our sharing. We ensured the richness of our information shared not only with our anchor stories but also the research that we selected to support much of it. Our work is dependable and likely transferable to other qualitative studies in the context of Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness.

Ethical Issues

As mentioned previously, we believe in integrity and being professional, so even in sharing truths, we protected the identity of others involved by changing their names. The way in which we described our workplaces, colleges, former schools, and other entities or businesses were written about in a manner that was conducive to this study and research, and not in a way that hindered anyone ethically. Our research was authentic to the cause while contributing to our university, our work, and education as a whole. We recognize that we must be brave in the face of our fears, as social justice demands it, and so we will. Our work ethic allowed us to be both bold and appropriate in our study. As a result of this, there were no concerns with confidentiality, data storage, the use of participants, and approval to interview them. As stated previously, names and settings have been changed to protect and respect this process.

Limitations and Delimitations

One of the potential limitations of our study involved us as participants only knowing what we knew, meaning we could only share what we experienced, encountered, or participated in. This included us being able to share only what has happened to us and what we have been directly involved in. Another limitation is the possibility of being dishonest by withholding information from our experiences that could help others. This was scary, literally terrifying, but we chose to do this, and a limitation could be that we succumb to the fear. Our research group held each other accountable by listing our narratives in a group document and pushed ourselves to include deep, dark, and bold anchor stories to readers. A lot of trust and norms took place

that allowed us to even get to this space with one another. Real friendships exist and with that, honesty amongst us is natural. We felt accountable to each other, and we were dedicated to not letting any of us fail, and that means we coached each other to persist, even when it was extremely difficult.

Our integrity and accountability to each was strong and we did not want to let our group down. We are each human, and that includes our biases and our perspectives of how things happened. Our stories were one-sided, and accurate according to what transpired, how we felt, and how we were impacted. We only chose to use ourselves as research participants, and this means that we were only allowing our voices and examples to be shared. We did not know if our work would have been expanded, enriched, or guided differently if others had been involved. We only focused on ourselves. This was powerful in a myriad of ways, but also hard for a reader to connect if they did not have similar encounters and experiences.

Summary

There was significance to our group's makeup; there were four of us, two of us were white while two of us are Black; two of us were women, and the other two were men. Two of our members worked in suburban school districts, while two of us worked in inner-city districts. One of our group members worked in what would be considered a core subject, English. Another group member worked in visual art, athletics, and administration. The other two staff members were administrators, one as a building assistant principal and one at the district level.

Based on all of our differences and unique experiences that we each brought to our group, we completed a qualitative study using the methodology of autoethnography to share our voices with readers to combat the spirit-murdering of Black students. As a research group, we sought to add to the existing literature and offer strategies for not only macro-educational systems change, but educators' individual practices as well. We hoped that this research will bring awareness to teachers that spirit-murder their students unintentionally and that it will cause them to stop. We believed that this research would inspire those who already know better to become more courageous in intolerable situations with their peers and impact change. We expected that this research would cause offenders to pause, reflect, and consistently choose differently within themselves before causing undue emotional damage within their Black students. We hoped that this research would not sit on a shelf in a binder collecting dust as just another incredible dissertation, but that it would affect the systemic transformation of how Black children are treated within all school systems by white people in positions of power. This includes all school staff that play a part in Black children's lives.

We were ultimately seeking healthy student experiences that did not cause any undue harm as a result of the color of their skin. The research gathered and the counter-stories and examples that were shared aid these purposes. There is power in sharing to hopefully influence other educators to better support their Black students by combating and eradicating racialized spirit-murdering practices and school systems. As a result, dignity could be restored to a field that is vital to Black students and their spirits:

Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way. (Kelley, 2002, p. 9)

This is essential because Black students need to know that racist and oppressive school systems do not have to remain their norm or their personal experience. Radical liberation and eradication from this is afoot, possible, real, and necessary. Each researcher hopes to lend their service in this way, starting from within.

Chapters 4 and 5 Synopsis

Counter-Stories: Black Researchers

The next two counter-stories serve as narratives for how two Black educators experienced spirit-murder as children and as parents from white educators. They share their tales of emotional and psychological trauma experienced during these situations and how they managed to consistently revive their spirits. While reflecting, both Black educators admit that as a result of internalized oppression, they also spirit-murdered Black students in their classrooms. Although they struggled with feeling guilty, they still hold themselves accountable for their actions as they intimately know the pain of being spirit-murdered.

Chapter 4: Spirit-Murdering is Real

Chapter Introduction:

My name is Courtney Jude, and I like to think of myself as an educator and lifelong learner. In my collection of stories, I share my experiences with spirit-murder in three very different thought-provoking ways. In my first story, I share a counter-story in which I utilize internalized racism and spirit-murder a Black middle school male. Next, I transitioned to sharing a story of a time when I dealt with spirit-murder. Finally, I share a very personal story of how I dealt with watching my son navigate through spirit-murdering in school. I share how I also went through spirit-murder during the time that he faced it.

You Call Yourself Black

I started my teaching career in a small town in Illinois that has a population of roughly 30,000 people. Coincidentally, the town is also where my undergrad institution is located. I was fortunate enough that one of my college basketball assistant coaches was also the president of the local school board. The basketball season typically runs from October until the end of February, which is also in the thick of hiring season for schools. During one of our away game weekends in Wisconsin, I was sitting with him when he asked me, "Where have you applied?" I admittedly told him that I had applied to mostly places back home close to Chicagoland. Chicagoland is a term that is used when you are speaking about Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. At that time there was still an allure of moving back to Chicago to teach students who looked like me and had similar upbringings. During this conversation, I half-jokingly said, "I wouldn't mind staying in

Galesburg for a little while.” Galesburg represented a place that I knew. It represented a safe space that was away from home, but also a place that offered community and familiarity. I was surprised when I got a call a few days later for an interview because I had not even applied. After a series of interviews, I was hired as an elementary teacher. I was the first of my friends to have a job lined up for post-graduation. I refined my craft for two years in Galesburg before a combination of my mother’s sickness and my homesickness urged me to head back home. It is worth noting during my time in Galesburg, I met a beautiful young educator who would later become my wife. She stayed in Galesburg and taught for another year before meeting me in Chicagoland. When I first returned to Chicagoland, I taught in Homewood, IL. I was less than ten minutes away from my parents and my old stomping grounds. It was a great feeling to be teaching students who I know grew up very similarly to me. I taught there for a year and a half until factors including (but not limited to) pay, and the birth of my newborn son forced me to leave and go to Chicago Public Schools (CPS), where my pay doubled. However, I quickly learned that not all money is good money, as I spent two trying years attempting to gain my footing in CPS. During my time in CPS, I ran into a roadblock that I had not encountered before. Although I was a Black male and my students were Black as well, I was having a hard time connecting with them. For example, I did not understand why the students did not respect me simply because I was the teacher. The simple classroom management techniques that I had learned in previous experiences were not effective. The usual way I planned my lessons was not able to keep their interest. I struggled as I saw that the things that worked in the rural area where I began my career and suburban

Homewood did not work in the urban neighborhoods of Englewood and Chatham on the south side of Chicago. Students weren't respecting me simply because I was the teacher in the front of the room. In my previous educational experiences, I was able to run a classroom with very few discipline issues. I remember a colleague looking at me and telling me that I just "wasn't ready to be a teacher." As much as it angered me then, I can now understand his point of view. After two years in Chicago Public Schools, I landed myself on the "Do Not Retain" list. It was a gut punch to my ego because I considered myself to be an effective educator. I started to blame CPS as a system because obviously, it was something that they were not doing. It wasn't me. For the remainder of the year, I became detached from providing instruction as I spent more time on finding a new job. I took off days to go to an interview and started to let the students do whatever they wanted as my decision was set in stone. I felt defeated because I moved back home and it had not gone according to my plan.

There are many thought processes and ideas that my wife and I have in common. One that has always been prominent is our love for our respective hometowns. I am a diehard Cubs, Bulls, and Bears fan. My wife, a St. Louis native, bleeds Cardinal red. A fun rivalry between us has always been when the Cubs and Cardinals play each other. Just as I have for Chicago, my wife has always expressed a love for St. Louis. So much so that there was always an idea that at some point we would move there. During the spring when I was not retained for a second year, we took a week-long visit to St. Louis. I was able to clear my head and explore the city. I spent time meeting people whom she

had known all her life. It was during that visit that we developed a plan to move to St. Louis. After all, I was without a job at the time anyway.

After spending the first five years of my educational career in various areas in Illinois, it was time for a change. St. Louis represented a chance to start new, and with my mother's health slightly improving, I could drive back and be there for her in a little over four hours.

We both applied for jobs and were excited when we both landed positions in St. Louis. My wife would be continuing to teach in an elementary school, while I was assigned to teach middle school, as a social studies teacher. I had not used my middle school endorsements up to that point, I was excited because I would have the opportunity to teach the grade level and subject that I enjoyed. When I was assigned my new school, I asked my wife about the location and caliber of students. She let me know that it wasn't anything that I couldn't handle, and it wasn't anything that I had not seen the previous school year while teaching in Chicago. This gave me both excitement and apprehension because it let me know that I had another chance to work with Black students, but it also reminded me of the pitfalls that I encountered in CPS. I spent the remainder of that summer reading and researching better ways to connect to urban students. Through my intentional research, I was able to become better at connecting students. In fact, I got to a place where I could build relationships with just about anyone. I started off the year strong, making sure that I set up expectations at the start. I used the previous year's failures as a barometer for what not to do. I made sure to plan out units weeks in advance. I spent the extra time again getting to know my students. The school year that came from

this productive struggle wound up being one of the most effective school years that I have ever had. I ended that year being nominated for Teacher of the Year. I was seen as a highly effective instructor. In addition, I had over 90% of my students pass the Constitution test. I had finally found my teacher voice and my niche in education.

The following year, I was ready to build on the success. I started the school year just like I did the year prior. I made sure that expectations were clear from the beginning. I also was making it a priority to build relationships with students. My reputation from the year prior preceded me, and for the most part, the students came into the class prepared to learn and listen. Throughout my time there, I was seen as an advocate for my students, who would make sure to hold them to high standards. The administration used my classroom as the model social studies class in the building when the upper administration came to visit. I was asked to be on the social studies curriculum team because of my efforts. Students would come to me with their challenges about things in a multitude of situations, seeking guidance on grades, relationships, issues at home, and situations with other teachers. I finally felt that I was the budding star that I knew I could be. I found the confidence that I had during the early years of my career. I started to volunteer for more opportunities at school. I started to be seen as a leader within the school.

As with any school, everything was not perfect. During my tenure as a middle school social studies teacher, I was faced with various challenges, both instructional and cultural. No situation stood out as much as the ongoing tension between students and my colleague next door who taught science. Our science teacher, an older white lady, had

taught at the building for upwards of twenty years and was in the last two years of her career. As what can be commonplace with educators towards the end of their careers, they can become burnt out from a multitude of things: failed policies, ineffective discipline, and unruly students to name a few. The students noticed and shared concerns regarding her approach to students. I was told increasingly through the year that phrases like “you people” were used. She also would compare students to her Black grandchildren (affluent mixed-race children) who seemed to be able to always behave correctly at school. She made sure to highlight that she was not racist because her grandchildren were Black. It was always interesting to me that she called them her Black grandchildren because they were just as much white as they were Black.

On various occasions, she would have students removed from her classroom and sent to either the office or the in-school suspension classroom for situations that, when looking at our discipline matrix, were not worthy of that consequence. Students would yell at her, saying that she was racist. During our time as colleagues, it’s important to note that I never had any negative interactions with her. She always made sure to be respectful to me and the teaching that I did in my classroom. She never represented her mixed-race grandchildren as being mixed or white. Each time she talked about them, she always mentioned the fact that they were Black, even though the young children had many more features that were shared with their white mom than the ones they had that resembled their Black dad. When students were forced to leave her class (which happened quite often), I would always invite them into my classroom to finish their work and reflect on the situation. In my mind, I would much rather them be in my classroom with me than be

out in the hallway because we had a strict policy on being in the hallway without a pass. If you were caught in the hallway, you would have to go to in-school suspension for the class period. I did not like this practice, as there were a multitude of times when students would have been triggered and then sent out of class, only to end up in ISS.

When students would complain about my colleague, I made sure to stand on the side of the teacher. I would listen and then go into finding a way to give reason to her unjust response. I would talk to students and mostly highlight how they were wrong. I always prompted them to go back and apologize, while never really closing the loop with the other teacher. As much help as I thought I was doing, I was also causing harm by being a person who looked like them and was still affirming the unjust policy of a teacher who didn't look like them. I was not ready to be the educator that they needed.

In this way, I hate to admit it, but I spirit-murdered my students who likely saw me as one of the adults in the building that they could trust, and I let them down. I did not advocate for them like I should have. For example, in instances when I knew that the student had either been triggered to elicit a response or had been wrongfully accused of something, I took the easier way out. I decided, more often than not, to defend the teacher. I would plead with students to seek to understand her ways so that they could be able to finish out the class and get along. In the few instances when I would confront her and speak to her about a specific decision she made, I would do so in a closed setting and not with the student present. I told myself I was trying to protect the dignity of my colleague, but looking back, I can see that by doing this, I was not protecting the dignity of those who needed the advocacy and protection the most, my students. I did not take

any of the situations to the administration because, simply put, I was not about to snitch on a colleague of mine. Although I did not call it spirit-murdering at the time, I knew that I was not being the advocate that they needed me to be. However, on multiple occasions, I continued to respond in the same way. I would use various ways to rationalize it in my mind.

A situation that still sticks with me to this day involved a student who had a history of discipline issues. He was an eighth grader who was attending our school after being at two different middle schools for the previous two years. When he came at the start of the year, we received a sort of briefing from the administration that this was his last chance at a middle school in our district. He came to us with a target on his back. All students deserve an opportunity to have a fresh start each year. However, we were briefed on him as if he was a criminal.

During his time at my school, he had his ups and downs and most days he could be a minor discipline setback. Various times he was sent out of classrooms and to the office for throwing paper balls and pencils, and for profanity (to name some examples). He spent various stints in in-school suspension, however none of the behaviors were enough to result in his final chance being revoked. When it came to him being in my class, his interactions were much tamer in comparison to other settings in the building.

Unlike many of the other students, when he was sent out of class, I never extended an olive branch of refuge. Multiple times, he would attempt to build a type of rapport for me to be a safe space for him. However, more often than not, my response

was for him to go to the office so that he could spend his time in-school suspension. I was turning into the same person that I did not like the other educators being.

During a specific situation, he was, yet again, kicked out of class because of a minor infraction. As he yelled from the hallway, I stuck my head outside to watch as the situation unfolded. From the commotion, I was able to deduce that the teacher next door had kicked him out for calling her a racist. I still to this day am not clear as to what transpired in the classroom. As he walked away from her door and towards mine, the teacher continued to trigger the student to gain a response. Through her verbal assault and triggering, his words turned from calling her a racist to her being called a “racist bitch.”

My classroom was on the way to the office. I had an opportunity to be an advocate for this student and help to remedy the situation. However, as he walked down the hall I joined in saying, “Oh you messed up now!” As he got closer, I reminded him about the fact that he was on his last strike with the district. As he walked past me, he looked at me and said, “You ain’t no better than her, you call yourself Black.” No words have ever been more hurtful to my ego than when he said this. With my bruised ego, I decided to walk ahead of him and positioned myself in his way as he continued to try to evade the accosting he was receiving, now from two teachers. I remember asking him, “Who do you think you are talking to?” As I stood in his way, he started to push against me. I remember egging him on by saying, “Oh what, now you're going to hit me?” The student, acting out of anger and rage, punched me in the stomach. With a crowd now watching, I bent over in anguish. As he ran to the office, it was the last time he would walk the hallways of our school, as he was expelled shortly after.

I was told to collect student statements, which I did. Because of my relationship with them, students wrote about the scene from a stance that emphasized the punch. Because of my positive reputation, I was not questioned. I was seen as just stepping in to help and assist a colleague. I was applauded as a hero because I helped a teammate and because I finally found a way to get a “problem child” removed.

However, I was not a hero. I was perpetuating the oppression that the student was experiencing. From the start of the year, he was not given an opportunity for a fresh start. Through the briefing, we entered the school year by looking at him through the lens of a problem that needed to be fixed. He wasn't awarded additional opportunities by staff. He was considered a problem from day one. Even in a situation where he reached out for understanding and support from someone who represented him and looked like him, he was denied. He saw other students being accepted, who were doing some of the same things he was doing. Through this denial, he was angry and resentful. It is important to note that even through all of this, he was one of my strongest students academically. He had a knack for history and was reading at a level higher than his peers.

After his expulsion, the rest of the school year went without a hitch. I continued to be an *advocate* for students. I also never fully addressed the unjust issues that arose. Throughout the year, students who knew him would tell stories of how he couldn't get into another school because of the expulsion on his record.

Flashforward: I do not know where he has ended up; however, from speaking to students through the years I learned that he did not graduate from high school. I know that there are a multitude of factors that can contribute to a person not being able to finish

high school, including (but not limited to) discipline issues, socioeconomic status, and academic performance. However, I would be remiss to not understand and highlight the effect that I surely had to negatively affect this outcome. If I had known better, I surely would have done better.

My missteps during this time in my career made me adjust and become a much better advocate not only for those that I serve but for myself as well. Not standing up for my students during that time left such a sour taste in my mouth that I could not help but become an educator who tries to speak up at any moment of injustice. Multiple times after this situation, I have been the voice of the voiceless. Each time I had the chance to be that voice, I always thought back at how my complacency and collaboration with spirit-murdering resulted in the complete change in trajectory in a young Black boy's life. I vowed that I would never again knowingly contribute to the destruction of Black self-esteem. In fact, it was my rationale for joining this program.

Joining the *Social Justice* in Education Cohort was not just because I needed a way to solidify a career administrator certificate, but rather, it represented a new learning opportunity. This program was a byproduct of the realization that I needed to continue to develop as a strong change agent for Black and Brown children. I saw myself being an advocate for students; however, I did not have the educational fortitude to be as effective as I wanted to be.

If I could go back, I would have first and foremost been the voice of change in terms of the teacher who felt that it was her duty to spirit-murder. That could have taken many forms. For example, I could have started by having conversations that could have

brought these things to her attention. In addition, I could have been a better model for the appropriate relationships that are needed for students who look like me. I could have offered advice so that all those involved would possibly have a better outcome. When I think of the rapport that my colleague and I had built, I think that if I had shown integrity and spoken up on behalf of my students more, she may have thought of her responses and would have been open to handling situations in a better way. There were times when she looked for affirmation in the way that she was treating students. In a lot of instances, I gave her that acknowledgment. I still wonder what could have happened if I would have acknowledged the students' voices instead.

I could have made a conscious effort to check in on those students who had complaints to see if the way that they were being treated was improving. If all else failed, I could have taken this to administration and if nothing was done at that level, I could have continued this up the chain and through the district. I could have fought because eradicating spirit-murdering is worth that much at least.

Trying To Find My Way

In middle school, I was seen as a "smart kid." During my 8th grade year, I was a part of a class of fifteen students who had the opportunity to spend half of their day at the neighboring high school to take Algebra 1 and Spanish 1 classes. This gave us a chance to gain credits for high school as we also completed requirements for middle school graduation. Each morning we could be bussed or walk to our high school classes. After our two classes at the neighboring high school, a bus would then transport us to our middle school for the remainder of the day. When it was released that the school we

would be joining was the high school closest to my home I was ecstatic. Two years prior, my sister was one of the star athletes at this high school, which was known for producing Division 1 players. There were neighborhood kids who we grew up with that were in the age range that fit between the roughly five years that separated my sister and me that went to this school. I was able to start a year earlier than expected. There was a strong sense of pride for the group of us that traveled between two schools each day. I remember finding ways to show teachers or hall monitors my two school IDs that hung around my neck. It felt like dual citizenship to two different worlds, and I was able to enjoy the privileges of both. I was seen in both circles as one of the smart kids. When it came time to make a high school choice, I decided to continue at the school that my sister attended. It only made sense to go to the school where I had learned to play sports during the athletic camps in the summer.

I ended up spending my first two years in high school not being satisfied with my high school experience. My sister had set such a high bar that I felt that I was stuck in her shadow. I was not (comparatively) the same caliber of athlete that she was. Although I loved sports like track and basketball, I was more concerned about my academic abilities in lieu of my sports success. Even with that in mind, I made the basketball team each year, although I rarely played. In addition, I found that the teachers did not care about student success in the way that I was used to. For example, I felt that the teachers in my honors course cared if I attempted or succeeded. However, in my general freshman courses, teachers seemed to be buying time. It was the last straw for me when a teacher said, “Regardless if y’all learn, I will get my check.” By the end of my sophomore year, I

was attempting to transfer within the district to the next closest high school. Unlike my current school at the time, the neighboring high school had much higher academic standards and was much looser in terms of athletic expectations. It is important to note that a lot of my friends, including nine of the fifteen students in my advanced class, were able to enroll at this high school. It seemed like a good fit. I decided to appeal to the school board. It is unusual that students would transfer due to a school not being a good fit. There had been numerous transfers before me who did so strictly for basketball. However, they usually found a friend's address to use so that they were able to attend. After a semester or so it wasn't unusual if that student's guise was discovered and they were forced to return to their assigned school. I wanted to do it the right way so that I didn't have to deal with that same fate. The board told me that they would consider a transfer if I wrote a two-page letter that explained why this would be the best situation for my education. They were very surprised when I gave a letter detailing my concerns that was double the length of their requirements. Shortly after I was given the ability to transfer to the high school.

As was the policy at all of the high schools, there is a day in the summer when students come in to examine their course schedule and have it approved. It was the first time in two years that I saw some of my closest friends from middle school. They introduced me to new students. The initial conversations with other students at this event were easy in terms that they were friendly and cordial. Most kept the conversations at the surface level.

I eagerly waited in line to talk to my new counselor. I stood behind one of my good friends from middle school, a young white boy who had been at my new high school for the two years that I spent at another space. We compared our schedules and saw that we would be sharing multiple honors and advanced placement courses. When he got to the front of the line, his time went without a hitch. His situation was common, and in fact, it was the type of situation that I was used to at my previous school. As I approached the counselor for my turn to enroll, she first noticed that I was a new student. She first asked me which school I came from. I responded and let her know that I was an in-district transfer student. These questions did not alarm me, however, the interaction afterward did. The counselor started to scrutinize my class schedule in a way that she had not for my friend. She looked at my address and asked me to repeat it. She wanted to make sure that that is where I live. She asked me if I lived in the area of town where most of our Black students lived. She looked at my schedule and walked away with my paper. I saw her talking to another adult (I would find out that the person was the principal). The principal joined her back in front of me, and they informed me that they needed to call my old school first because they needed to be sure that I could do that work. I have always taken my education and learning seriously, and I had never dealt with a situation where my academic ability was being questioned. I saw them on the phone for approximately five to ten minutes. Other students were selected by other counselors and quickly went through the process. They both returned to me to inform me that I was ‘approved’ to take the courses. I noticed that nobody else had to go through an approval process. Still, I was excited to be in a few classes with people that I knew. As I was

leaving, the counselor asked me, “Are you sure you can handle your course load?” Again another question that had not been asked of anyone around me. I walked away feeling confused. The anticipation of a new start in high school was tarnished as I started to doubt myself. I wondered if I could really be as smart as I was prior. I was nervous, wondering if my 3.5 GPA would compute at this new school. Was I good enough? I would soon find out.

I found the coursework a little more rigorous, but not anything that I could not handle. The classes were reminiscent of what I encountered previously. A major difference that I noticed was that, because I was a transfer from the neighboring high school, I was seen as temporary. For example, multiple staff and students would ask me: “Do you plan to stay the whole year?” or they would ask: “Are you going to come back after this year, or go back to your school?” This was harmful because I was trying to make the school that I was in as my school. I could not pinpoint at that age why I was being treated this way. I thought it could have possibly been a form of hazing. However, I noticed that another student who transferred who came from a school out of district in an affluent white area wasn’t being asked the same type of questions that I was. Although I did find advocates and friends, it seemed that I could not get past the feeling that people were expecting me to fail.

For a lot of my junior year, I spent time proving that I belonged. I learned that my grades were not enough to show that I was a valued part of the school community. It was not until I started to assimilate to the culture in the building that I started to feel like I was a part of the community. For example, I started to make sure that I differentiated myself

from those who looked like me who were not usually represented in the advanced courses. I would make sure that other school members knew that I lived in a good area. I would say things like, "I'm one of the good ones." I became the token Black friend to students who did not want to address the fact that they were racist or had prejudiced tendencies. I became a voice of unreason. I became a Black boy who would laugh and affirm racially charged statements so that I could feel like I belonged and hide my hurt. I changed my speech patterns to sound more like those that I decided to align with. It wasn't until another Black student challenged me and said, "You trying to sound white." I brought it up to my new 'friends' who assured me that they were just jealous because they weren't like me.

I continued this during my senior year. I was now a part of the in-crowd. I was no longer being asked if I was going to stay there. I started to date a white girl who was in my graduating class. I truly cared and enjoyed her company, but part of the allure was the fact that she was part of a culture that I longed to be accepted by. My senior year I started to make sure that I dressed differently. During my senior year, I was recruited in basketball and academics from a selective liberal arts institution. I learned that my high school coach was an alumnus of the school (he also grew up in the small town that the school was in). I was excited that I was being recruited. So much so that I told my high school coach. Up until this point, he was an adult who seemed to be an advocate for me. In addition, I could tell that since I made the changes that I did, our relationship had blossomed. I thought that he would be happy to see one of his players attend his alma mater. I was expecting a situation where I would be applauded, and he would share

stories of life on campus. Instead, he asked me: “Do you think you belong there?”, “It’s not an easy school for someone from your background.” Throughout all the assimilation that I tried, I was still not accepted. Just as I felt when I transferred, I felt lost and as if I was a temporary person.

What has always been interesting to me is that I left one high school where I did not feel I belonged and ended up going to another one where I felt the same feelings but in a more detrimental way. At that age, I was confused about the treatment that I received but I did not have the knowledge to thoroughly pinpoint what it was. Because I was from the neighboring predominantly Black school, I was excluded. I was seen as disposable. Due to this, I did not feel safe and accepted for a long period of time. It was not until I changed who I was and started to go along in order to get along that I was accepted by my new school. As a young seventeen-year-old boy, I allowed my spirit to be murdered to the point that it was no longer visible.

My Junior

I still remember racing down the highway from Chicagoland back to Galesburg, IL, while my then-newlywed wife nervously awaited our arrival at the hospital and scheduled c-section. We had been told that our baby boy was breached and that the best way to preserve both parties’ health would be to schedule a c-section. Other than this blip, all signs pointed to a healthy baby boy. Later that day, August 18th, 2014, we welcomed a healthy little boy into this world. He looked (and still does look) just like his mother. Although he has his own name, I sometimes think of him as my junior because:

1. We share the same middle name, just like my father
2. He acts just like I did at that

age. It has been enjoyable to watch him grow into a young man. I know that the choices that we make as parents are beneficial for him and his future.

One of these pivotal choices came four years later when we started to decide on which school would be the best fit for him. By the time he was four, we had made our move as a family to St. Louis. My wife, a proud SLPS (Saint Louis Public School) graduate, had more knowledge of the way that St. Louis schools operated. During my adolescence in the Chicagoland area, the idea of any school choice was very different from what I experienced growing up. Growing up, our suburban township had two elementary school districts, and a district of four high schools that separated zoning by four major streets. If you lived on the left side of the street, then you went to a certain high school. Most of the time, the students went to the same high school for four years. There was very little transfer in schools. There were not any specialty or technical schools, although each of the four high schools did have curriculum courses like computer science, auto mechanics, and wood shop that could also be taken as electives. Overall, the schools would be considered your middle-America type of situation. In our area, you could, for the most part, gain an education and probably graduate if you tried. In my graduating class of 357 students, approximately 330 graduated on time. It was not uncommon to see students from my high school going on to college. The only navigating of my k-12 education was for me to determine my bus stop.

Fast forward to the time when we started to attempt to find a school for my son. My wife started to research the magnet (public schools in a district that have a special emphasis, and therefore may have additional entrance requirements) and traditional

neighborhood options in St. Louis. We also looked at various charter schools and even some non-traditional elementary schools to determine the best school that would address our unique intersectionality between school finances and school abilities. Deciding on his school reminded me of the process that students experience when trying to select the best college for them. We went on numerous school tours and talked to some educators at different schools as well. One thing that struck me as odd during this process was the competition between schools. As we know, in American education today, school choice, usually between a charter school and a traditional public school is an ongoing issue between two sides that are attempting to achieve the same common goal. In a lot of cities, we expect some charters to be a part of the choices for education. However, in St. Louis, school choice goes beyond that. Some students now can choose between a myriad of neighborhood, magnet, charter, or private options. For example, if you live in the historic Central West End neighborhood you can attend K-5 learning at the following schools: Hamilton, Washington Montessori, New City School, and Kipp Victory. After elementary school, you can go to upwards of seven middle schools. High school has over fifteen options when you take into account the various magnet and charter options and the disproportionate success rate of schools in St. Louis. It makes it even more imperative that we made a smart choice for how we wanted his educational journey to begin. It is also important to note that a lot of the choices are not only from varying competing networks and districts, but rather they are also from SLPS, as there is competition amongst their own schools as well.

We landed at an early childhood center (Pre-K-second grade school) on the south side of the city. The school is seen as an environment that truly fosters creativity and a sense of community. I also learned that this was the same school my brother-in-law went to as a child, and he ended up graduating two years early from high school, so in my mind, it seemed like a great choice for his school.

When he started Pre-Kindergarten, we learned early on that we had found a gem of a school, and an even more of a treasure in his Pre-K teacher for the first two years of his educational career. His first teacher was patient and kind to her students. She took her time getting to know families and had a positive disposition. Our son had grown to have some trouble regulating his anger, and when he would show this struggle in class, his teacher made sure that he had a space to calm down and the ability to recover from the situation. Throughout his time in her class, our son gained a love for school and for learning. He enjoyed trying to write his name and trying to read words. He displayed a curiosity about learning new things. So much so, that he was added to the advanced enrichment curriculum at the school. I watched as my son blossomed into the learner that we knew he could be. The excitement for kindergarten was altered because of the COVID-19 epidemic. Because both of his parents were school administrators, we had the privilege of keeping him out of school. Instead, he learned via Microsoft Teams, while he sat in one of our offices or at the desk at home when we would have a work-from-home day. Even with the challenges that COVID-19 presented, he continued to excel and enjoy school. He continued to be inquisitive and enjoyed school and learning.

First grade brought new additions for my son at school as he was no longer just a big brother at home, he was now tasked with being a big brother at school. He was so excited for everyone to meet his little sister and excited to be given the opportunity to show her the ropes of his school. We were successful in our request to have her be in his former teacher's class. She continued to display the same care that she gave to our first child. In terms of first grade for him, he continued some of the same behaviors as he was still a student who wanted to excel in school. I would be remiss to say that there were some behavioral concerns during this time. As in previous grades, his anger resurfaced at times, and sometimes he could be very talkative. However, just as the year prior, it was not anything that his teacher could not handle. She found unique ways to keep him challenged and occupied. He was a first-grader reading at third-grade level. This would result in situations where he could become off task in class simply because he was done with his work. His teacher advocated for his education by adding him to a book club in the second-grade class. She would challenge him by giving him larger projects to complete. She collaborated with his accelerated programming teacher to gain more insight into his interests so that she could guide him. By the end of first grade, my son was ready to tackle the world as a second grader.

Second grade is the last year at the school, as it is an early childhood school. Even though we had some apprehension about what would lie ahead when we had to choose his next school, we were comforted by the fact that we had one more year at the school that we had grown to know and love.

One thing that we did not plan for was how the pandemic had changed the teaching force. Education before the pandemic was in a dire situation in terms of the teacher shortage. The Economic Policy Institute tells us, “They (the studies) help analysts detect when there are not enough qualified teachers to fill staffing needs in a labor market that does not operate like other labor markets.” The lack of qualified teachers pre-pandemic had negative effects on education. The teacher shortage has serious consequences. “A lack of sufficient, qualified teachers threatens students’ ability to learn. Instability in a school’s teacher workforce negatively affects student achievement and diminishes teacher effectiveness and quality.” However, post-pandemic only brought worse problems (Fullard, 2023). A study by The New Teacher Project (TNTP) surfaced:

Many schools across the country are facing their toughest staffing situation in recent memory, with many teachers thinking of quitting, taking leaves of absence, or actually resigning; a depleted pool of substitute teachers; and fewer people applying to fill vacancies in a job market that’s pushing people away from relatively low-paid careers like teaching. It’s all happening at a moment when students need diverse, effective teachers more than ever to help them accelerate back to grade level after the disruption of the past two years. (Fullard, 2023)

With this shift in education, schools saw an influx of people who may not have been fully equipped to be in education. Although I am not sure of his second-grade teacher's credentials, I did know that she was a brand-new educator fresh out of a teacher prep program. It’s also important to note that this was his first educator who was not Black. Up until this point, we were fortunate (in our opinion) to have our son be in front of teachers

who resembled him. We did this, not because of an innate prejudice, but rather because we based this on the research that more often than not, Black students seem to learn more from teachers who look like them. However, to juxtapose this idea, we understood the need for our son to be able to work with others who may not look like him.

The school year started according to plan. Our son was happy to go to school, and happy to make sure that his little sister felt safe. As in years prior, our son would come home to tell us about the happenings at school. It wasn't until late fall when we started to notice a shift in our son. No longer were we seeing the happy child that we were used to during pickup. He seemed more and more detached from the idea of going to school. In the mornings he went from being eager to go to school to it becoming a battle to get him up in the morning. We were hearing stories less and less, and when we did, they usually revolved around the class being more and more disruptive. His former teachers also noticed a shift. The previously mentioned "anger" had returned, and now it was much worse. Frequently, during dismissal, his former teachers would let us know about how he was changing. For example, he would choose to eat by himself at lunch, and when he did sit at his table, it usually ended up being some sort of issue that would cause multiple people to become upset. It is important to note that throughout this time, I had not been given this information by his teacher, rather I was gaining this information from other educators with whom my son had gained a rapport. Although I appreciated that they were still being advocates for my son even after he had gone to a new grade, I still found it odd that his classroom teacher did not believe that this was important information to share.

Things reached a fever pitch in the fall when his teacher sent a message regarding his achievement level in class. She briefly mentioned how he was excelling in class. However, a predominant amount of the two-paragraph message focused on his negative behavior. Toward the end of the message, she made sure to mention that other students were closing the gap in achievement between them and my son. She made sure to let us know that she was “so happy that he is being humbled by students catching up to him in his reading and math levels.” I reread the message to make sure that I was reading it correctly. I shared it with trusted friends and colleagues because I wanted to make sure that I wasn't blinded by the anger I was feeling. Unfortunately, after reading it again, my anger was raging. Who did she think she was to write such an inappropriate sentence about my son? Why was she gloating at the fact that his achievement was slowing down? It made me question her motives and if she had my son's best interests at heart. It made me think of his previous teachers who would never even think like this about their students as they typically wanted them to thrive at the highest levels. This was the first time I began to feel that my son's spirit was being murdered. This was also the first instance where I felt my spirit being murdered by his teacher.

I started to question myself as a parent, which is something I had never done before. I try to teach my children to have pride in who they are and to own their qualities and shortcomings. I made sure that my son knew he should be proud to be a high achiever, but hearing that he needed to be humbled made me second-guess my parenting as I questioned if I was doing something wrong with my son. Was I raising him right? Was I supposed to be teaching him more anger management skills? Was this all my fault?

Should I be harder on him and increase his discipline? All of these thoughts devastated me. Second-guessing myself wreaked havoc on my spirit because it was not who I was. I was confident in myself. I used the same love and discipline that my own father had used for me. This hurt me deeply as a Black man raising a young Black son. Was I not setting my young Black son up for life appropriately? I wondered if I was failing him as his father. It is true that words have power, and his teacher did not understand the unmeasurable effect her words had on my family. I became enraged with his teacher for making me doubt myself and I continued to do what I knew was right, which was raising my son well.

As a family, we were always seen as advocates for our son's school. This was the first time where we felt like we were outsiders in the inner workings of the school. My son's teacher made it clear that her goal was to humble him and break him down, which would in turn break us down. During this time, I could feel the pressures of being spirit-murdered based on the treatment of my child. For example, my involvement in his school shifted. I started to dissociate myself from parent involvement initiatives. I no longer read the PTO emails, nor did I give feedback on how to improve the school. I felt that if they were going to treat my son this way, then I did not need to spend the additional time giving them support. I shared my jaded view with others and decided that I would rather not share my sentiments with the school. It strained my relationship with his principal as well. Being a colleague of hers changed as I did not readily collaborate with her during principal professional developments. The dissociation affected my daughter's classroom as well, as I no longer was helpful to teachers whom I had created a

positive relationship with in the past. In retrospect, I wondered if this parental dissociation and apathy for school was something that other parents of Black children faced when their child (and themselves) were being spirit-murdered. As a parent, I did not feel valued anymore, so in my mind, I thought: why bother? Examining this now, I believe that this was in fact counter-productive to the type of support I should have given. I could have used my rapport and involvement in the school as a way to identify spirit-murdering much more effectively.

It was not important to his teacher that he was being stagnant in class, rather it was more important to her that others were catching him. She used the words “happy” as if she was going to relish the day that the educational dragon that was my son’s academic achievement was slain. There was no mention of additional support for his educational or socioemotional situations. The message was centered on how she wanted him to be humbled.

We immediately responded and continued a month-long discourse with the teacher. We decided to schedule a meeting with her and the principal, it was during this meeting that she eventually apologized. I felt that she only apologized because we got the principal involved. After the apology, we continued to see various signs that our son was being spirit-murdered. For example, he became detached from learning new things. A young boy who used to love to finish homework and read a book no longer was interested in either one. His anger at the end of the day would carry over into his home life and his relationship with his family. He no longer showed interest in being the ultimate big brother at school. I could tell that even after this situation was seemingly rectified, his

light was being diminished. My wife and I are career educators and usually use our knowledge of policies and procedures to our advantage. We saw a change in him and it resulted in additional spirit-murdering from a parent's perspective. Through this ordeal, I started to feel lost and powerless. I felt that I was no longer able to continue to be this strong advocate for my son and his journey through school. I started to count down the days until he would be done with second grade. I could not wait for the last day of school. I resented his teacher to the point that I would no longer speak to her during arrival and dismissal proceedings.

As the school year progressed, we monitored for any outward signs of spirit-murdering. However, what we saw was more subtle ways of oppression. For example, when my son would show any type of frustration in class, an administrator would immediately call us. There was no longer a provided space where he was able to regulate his emotions so that he could continue with the day. He would come home and mention how he had to spend time sitting in the office or with the counselor. We would ask if the teacher had done anything previously to help the situation, to which often the response was no. We were embarrassed as parents when it was recommended to us that he see a counselor outside of school. It was a hard pill to swallow because at no point over his educational career thus far had he struggled this much. Spirit-murdering made me question if I was doing a good enough job as a father.

Since the school's highest grade is second, the end of the year is seen as a celebration for the students. The last week of school is filled with multiple parties and various field trips. Just like most children, my son was excited for the culmination of his

early childhood educational years. During the first field trip of the week, there was a situation where my son and some of his friends were horseplaying on the school bus. The teacher asked all of the boys to stop playing. After being asked, the young boys continued to play around and tickle each other on the bus. However, from multiple accounts (including the other adult) the only child that was moved was my son. On the way off the bus, my son decided to hit the other student in the back of the head as they walked into the school. When I received the phone call, I was very upset with my son, and his inability to control himself. When I spoke to him about it at home, he mentioned that he was “fed up, because every time something happens, it is always my fault.” We reiterated how disappointed we were in his actions. However, just like him, I was fed up. I was fed up with the numerous phone calls and the unfair treatment. I was fed up with feeling that this year I did not have a voice and that nothing was being done after our numerous complaints. I was fed up with not being heard. I was fed up with being seen as the family of the child who had many problems.

The next day, I received a message from his teacher which stated: “In order for him to go on the field trips that are planned for this week, a parent must accompany him. This is imperative so that we make sure that the other children are safe.” These words struck the same chord that the previous statement had. I am not negating the fact that my son was wrong, nor did I believe that he shouldn’t have a consequence. However, in my opinion, the fact that a student who, other than classroom-level discipline issues, now needed to be accompanied by an adult in order to attend the field trips was harsh. I had never received a phone call or documentation about him hitting another student up until

this point. After the first time, he now needed an adult to accompany him. The words that stuck out the most from her message were the idea that this was needed to keep the other students safe.

As a Black man, there are many instances where just my presence makes others feel unsafe. I have seen instances of women grabbing their purses closer as I walked by. I was devastated to learn that this racist mindset was already being used against my young son. Black boys and men in America have to be cognizant to not scare anyone, or take up too much space. Now, my second-grade son had to do the same in a space where his safety was supposed to be valued just as much as everyone else's. As with previous messages, there was this underlying tone that he was the only problem that needed to be addressed. There was this idea that other students needed to be kept safe from him. One hit by him, and now he was someone that everyone in the class needed to be kept safe from, just the thought was ludicrous, cruel, stigmatizing, and unfair.

I immediately sent this to the administrative team who overturned the teacher's decision. They decided that he did not need a parent for the remaining field trips. He served a lunch detention for his actions and had to write an apology letter. Although I was nervous about the field trips, nothing happened. My son did not hit another student, and everyone was kept safe, except, maybe my son. Now I knew that there was a target on my son's back. It seemed to me that my son was unsafe with his teacher. Who needed to be present to watch her to ensure that my son would be safe from her spirit-murdering him? It hit me that he had been with this nice racist teacher for an entire year. His school had become a traumatic place for both him and for me. No longer did I come to his school

with excitement. I dreaded visiting because I was anxious and alert, feeling as if she would approach with an asinine comment regarding my son's behavior. My anxiety was so bad, it became physical, as I could feel it in the pit of my stomach. I dreaded each time I would see him walking towards me with an adult next to him.

The end of the school year made me sick to my stomach. This physical manifestation was my body reacting to the spirit-murdering that was occurring each day to my son. I think this was happening because I knew the research, I knew the path that she was trying to put him on. I had seen this time and time again, this was how the pipeline to prison began. Harsh and racist discipline practices led to disinterested black boys who eventually became what society and this racist teacher thought of them. I spent parts of each day worrying about my son. I worried about his emotional well-being in this classroom. It got to the point where I debated removing him for the final parts of the school year and having him attend my school.

It is heartbreaking to admit, but my son experienced a year of intentional spirit-murdering. As a parent, I have tried to look back to see what event took place that made the change occur. I have done this to see where, as a parent, I had made a mistake. Where did I go wrong? Was my child now this student who needed to be humbled and feared? Was he someone who we needed to make sure did not interact with anyone else? Why was he being singled out?

I was fortunate enough that these situations happened during my time in this course. As this was happening to my son, I was learning about the effects of spirit-murder. I was learning about the impact that it could have on the life and

educational experiences of a child. I was seeing these things in real-time. I was struggling, (as I am sure every parent would) with the best way to respond. Do I become angry and yell? Do I believe the teacher and only redirect my son? Learning more equipped me with the ability to respond in a way that kept the dignity of others, but also allowed me to stamp the issues that I was seeing. As I wrote this, I decided to not use my son's name. This was intentional because it could be anyone's son. As we studied spirit-murder and its effects throughout this journey, we learned that situations like this happen all the time in K-12 educational settings because of racist white school systems. I am hoping that my son's journey through this can help someone else navigate and address spirit-murdering for their own child.

Chapter 5: My Exposure To And Involvement With Spirit-Murder

Chapter Introduction:

My name is Casetta Brown and I am a Black researcher and educator, but before this, I was a Black child who experienced racial trauma, known in this dissertation as spirit-murder. In my counter-story, I begin by sharing a disturbing middle school encounter with the vicious spirit-murdering cycle that was both painful and damaging to my psyche and self-confidence. I proceed by being even more vulnerable and disclosing how I inadvertently caused the same harm to my students during my first few years as a teacher. I end with my most emotional tale of all by exposing how my four-year-old son was spirit-murdered as a Pre-Kindergarten student, and how I experienced spirit-murder simultaneously as his mother.

I: Innocent Childhood - I Deserved More As A Child - School Year 1996-1997

August 1997: "Then I Don't Have To Be Here With Children Like You."

My stomach was tight, my palms were sweaty, and it felt like I was about to cry. I sat there feeling alone and downright terrified. The only positive thoughts that I had at that point were that my hair was pretty, my uniform colors were cute, and I was very smart. I had often been picked on because of my hair and my clothing, but no one could deny that I was a great student. So for once, I felt confident that I wouldn't be bullied. Unfortunately, I was bullied; my spirit was murdered by a white teacher with whom I was supposed to be safe.

I did my best to stop fidgeting, but my anxiety was in overdrive because it was the first day of seventh grade, and I did not know anyone at my new school. I was eleven

years old, and I had attended my church's Christian school for all my kindergarten through sixth-grade years. My elementary school was a small-knit community full of members of my church as teachers and administrators, my two older sisters who went to high school there, and my mother who worked at the school as a teaching assistant. Grades K-12 had been held in one building, and I loved it. Our pastor was the superintendent, and he had been like a father to me ever since my father passed. Sadly, our school lost its funding and closed. I was devastated, and my fear was tangible. Even though I had experienced bullying at my old school, it was still familiar, it felt safe, and my village was there. I had never been away from my family at school and this new experience was not working for me.

I was making it through the day, just barely. I had never changed classes in elementary school besides related arts or going to gym class, so this new middle school experience of having passing time and lockers further aided my distress. I realized, though, that many of the other students in my class were just as scared as I was. I began to bond with one girl because she was also shy and was very kind. Her name was Chawna, and boy was I grateful for her. Chawna and I became best friends instantly, and suddenly, middle school was not so bad anymore. Until we went to science class, that is.

It was near the end of the day, and after having the opportunity to get to know my classmates better, I was starting to match names to faces after listening to attendance being called in each class. It was a very small school, so there was only one seventh-grade class, meaning we traveled as a cohort. Therefore, I was loosening up, starting to giggle at some of the other students' antics, and enjoying myself. The majority

of the students were Black, and this added to my comfort. Still, I had been selecting seats near the teacher's desk up front, every period. I was comfortable with being a nerd, and science class was no different. Our teacher's name was Mr. B. because his last name was really long and hard to pronounce, so he said we could shorten it. Things were going well with our teachers because they had all seemed genuinely nice and almost all of them looked like me. There were not many white teachers coming to the inner city, thirty minutes west of Detroit to teach little Black kids. So, any white teacher that did, I trusted that they cared about me because of their bravery. Mr. B. taught me that this was naive within the first thirty minutes of his class.

“All right, class, settle down. I am Mr. Beardarden, but you all can call me Mr. B. I will be your science teacher this year,” Mr. B. stated. He continued by taking attendance in the same way that the other teachers had, but I noticed one main difference about Mr. B.: he was nervous. He seemed afraid of us. I could tell by the way his voice shook. He stayed behind his desk, both sitting and standing, but it seemed like he did not feel comfortable leaving that area. It was as if behind his desk was his safe space. I felt sad for him because I wanted him to relax and be more at ease, but it seemed like he was getting increasingly anxious as he tried to gain control of the class since it went downhill after attendance. Many of the students' real personalities had emerged. This meant that it took Mr. B. multiple times to regain control of the classroom after attendance. I feared that my classmates were going to run over him, and they did.

“Now see here, I am here for you,” Mr. B. raised his voice. *Oh no, it is ok, Mr. B. You do not have to yell; it is going to be okay. That was a kind thing to say, and it made*

sense, because why else would you teach in this neighborhood? I appreciate that. Come on, Mr. B., you got this. I am rooting for you!

I had always wanted to be a teacher since I was a little girl. This means that I always had profound respect for my teachers and worked hard at a young age to foster really good relationships with them. I wanted to emulate and learn from them. I was also just taught to be respectful of my elders and people in positions of authority. I was also just naive and innocent, so I liked everyone until they showed me that they did not deserve my regard. This is why, minutes later, Mr. B. really hurt my feelings. He continued raising his voice, hoping to regain our attention, and get us to be quiet and listen to him, “But if you all cannot quiet down enough for me to even speak, then I don’t have to be here with children like you.” *What did he mean by that? ‘Like you!’ Either way, it hurt. This statement seemed unkind, and I hated it when teachers lumped us all into one category. Only a few students were acting up, it was not all of us.* “I could be teaching in any school district that I wanted to in the Metro-Detroit area, but I am choosing to be here with you. So, you need to show me the respect that I deserve, and be better students,” he huffed. The words he used did not seem very kind to his class, but more, he was starting to sound a little arrogant and condescending, like he was better than us. This is also not the way to win over the disruptive students; if anything, this was the opposite of what he should have been doing and saying.

Class continues, and most of the pranksters shape up. I can tell that Mr. B. is too nervous to do a teambuilder with the class like all of our other teachers. He jumps straight into our textbook, likely out of fear of losing control of the class again. Class finally ends,

and I make it to my mom's car in the pickup line. I have missed her and am so grateful to be in a vehicle driving away from the school. I share about my day, my awesome teachers, and my new friend, Chawna. I do not mention Mr. B.'s words to my mom, not because she would turn the car around to tell him off. That is not who she is, my mother would pray for him, laying hands on him and all, but in a spiritual way. I chose not to mention Mr. B. because I secretly hoped that he was just flustered and that he would regain control and be more comfortable in front of the class the next day. At this point, I was still rooting for Mr. B. because everyone made mistakes, he was visibly nervous, but certainly, things would be better for everyone tomorrow. We had all gotten the first day of school out of the way.

October 1997: "You all are not smart enough . . ."

Mr. B. continued to struggle, and it only got worse each day. It had been two months, and still, he had no strategies in place for how to professionally manage his classroom. This was painful to witness daily, and to be honest, quite traumatizing. It made me upset that my classmates were reaffirming his beliefs that Black children were dumb, couldn't learn, and that he was there to save us. I wasn't used to this and I wondered if all Black children were like this. This wreaked havoc on my psyche because I had been in a school system where Black children behaved better, but what I witnessed daily in Mr. B.'s class was eradicating that. Then I realized that the onus was both on the students misbehaving, but also on Mr. B. He was the adult in the room and he was hired to do a job, he just wasn't really good at it. I hated this for him and me. There were a few of us who actually enjoyed learning, and the other students hindered this process by being

disruptive. This meant that science class was the worst part of the day. The same students who misbehaved with Mr. B. treated our other teachers completely differently; the main difference was that the other teachers had gotten to know us, and they had structures and routines in place from the first day of school. From the very beginning, we knew what we could and could not do with these other teachers, both white and Black.

Mr. B. never did this. He was too scared to let his guard down to engage with us, share parts of his life with us, and be an authority figure in class with us. It was also clear that he saw his employment at our school as a service to us, making this known often. That did not feel too good, but still, I was rooting for him. I was naive to continue believing in him, but I wanted him to be successful, but it seemed like he just did not know how. My self-confidence was waning because he continued to make generic comments about the students who misbehaved, and although wrong, he did not differentiate. *Did he think I was bad too? I wasn't! I was nothing like some of my peers.* He was so obviously afraid of the Black males in my class, that he never gained their respect. One day, he couldn't even make it through our test review because of the many disruptions, and he just lost it. In his tirade, he yelled, "You all are not smart enough! You are not smart enough to pass this test without this review. Here, I am trying to help you, but you won't even let me do that for you." You could have heard a pin drop; such was our shocked silence. I remember whimpering, I was so hurt. After looking around the room, I could tell that I was not the only one. His words had a profound impact on us. He was right to be upset, but wrong in what he said. This was traumatic for me because no one had ever spoken to me like that. I have never been called dumb or stupid. Regardless

of the fact that he was not talking directly to me, I still processed it that way. My self-confidence in science was deteriorating.

Mr. B. and I had a great relationship because I made that so. I was a good student. I asked questions. I turned in my work. I paid attention. I was respectful. I had been hoping for the best for him, but I knew that the sound I had just made was it for me. His words stung. Even though, as I mentioned before, I knew that logically, he was not talking to or about me, I was still very sad. I had been praying that there would be a switch flipped inside of him, that he would suddenly wake up and know how to manage my Black peers. I had a certain image of him in my head, it was of him being successful. Not only could he not figure this out, but he had just crossed a line that he could never come back from. Looking at his red face, and then into his eyes, I knew that he knew this too.

He unlocked his desk and reached in to grab his car keys; he left the room. The class was still mostly silent, but there were some snickers and murmurs all in relation to what we had just experienced. The class was out of control, I admit, but this was beyond me. Shortly after, our counselor came into the classroom, told us to work quietly on any homework we had, and then dismissed us at the bell. That was in the middle of the week. We did not see Mr. B. the next day, or the next. It was not until that next Monday that he would return.

January 1998: “There is no amount of money that could make me continue to teach such disrespectful children.”

Middle school got better! I was earning all A's. I had a small group of friends that I could trust, and these friendships came with sleepovers and being invited to birthday parties. I joined the Yearbook Club. I did not feel alone or afraid anymore. It had been a big transition for me, but I learned to mind my own business and be kind to all. Sure, I heard the murmurs about my hair on bad hair days, and I did not have quality or name-brand clothes on dress-down days, but for the most part, I was left alone. I was not bullied, which was such a relief because I had initially feared this most. Students came to me for notes, help, and support when they needed it.

The only time I received any negative attention outside of the small talk was when I would unwisely try to calm the class down for Mr. B. "Come on, y'all, let him talk," and "If we're quiet, we can get through the assignment and have free time, just chill, guys," were some of the comments I would make to my peers. They were not pleased with me begging on his behalf for them to calm down, be respectful, and listen so that we could proceed. This did not cause me major harm; they would just disagree because they felt he was a racist and condescending teacher who did not mean us well. The toxic cycle of this was that they were right, but they had no idea that their behavior sparked his outrage. He could have kept those truths hidden from us, he should have, but he did not whenever he got really angry.

There was a bet going on that Mr. B. would not make it to spring break, and part of this bet was that the students actually had to try not to be disruptive so as not to trigger him. The idea was that he was such a horrible teacher, that his true colors would show, with or without our misbehavior. Deep down, I wanted to continue to believe in him. I do

not know why; maybe it was because I wanted to be a teacher myself, or maybe I was just that naive, or maybe I felt that deep down, he really was a good teacher who just did not know how to become great. I felt that he was a good guy, just not cut out for teaching in an urban school. I would learn to stop believing in him once and for all because he broke my 12-year-old heart when he quit during our class one day in January. This class was not misbehaving any more than they normally did, and this was not even the worst that Mr. B. had dealt with, but I guess he had reached his wit's end.

Mr. B. and a Black female student were going back and forth about her grade. She clearly felt that she had earned a higher grade and he vehemently disagreed. The student did not say any curse words, but she did get loud with Mr. B., and she did lean towards him in a threatening manner across his desk. It was obvious that he had had enough. "How dare you," Mr. B. yelled. "How dare you move towards me in a threat of violence? You are all so ignorant! You do not know how to receive help. I am tired of it!" By then, he was yelling. He proceeded to grab a box and unlock his desk. *Oh no, this is not good. I am used to him yelling, but he is actually packing his stuff. Oh boy!* "There is no amount of money that could make me continue to teach such disrespectful children. What an idiot I have been to even try. I quit!" He said other choice words before departing, but I will always remember him walking out of the classroom. I took that personally, even though I knew it had not one thing to do with me, and even though he did not say it, I knew that he was specifically referring to 'disrespectful (*Black*) children,' and that hurt. I began to cry for a few reasons, mainly because this was a lot to take on as a kid. I had never witnessed someone be so acrimonious. His anger was tangible, and I was happy he

was no longer in the room in that moment because it felt unsafe. I was also crying because I was still wishing for the best for him, hoping he could pull it off and not only make it to the end of the school year but that he would connect with the students that scared him. His words stung, what he had said, what he had been saying all along since the first day of school, really struck me as emotionally abusive. I was unfamiliar with the emotions that I was feeling. I had never been exposed to that level of behavior from an adult, nor had I been in such direct contact with it.

I had not experienced this before; I had only read about it, heard about it, and seen it in movies, but I finally allowed myself to admit that he was racist. He looked down on Black people, especially the males in his classroom. This caused me to feel different. Whenever he got near the boys, you could see his body posture become stiff, and it was easy to see that he was really nervous. So, no matter how nice he was to me, he still had lowered expectations of Black people. He thought he deserved our respect because he was there to *help* or *save* us. I did not have the words back then, but this man had been spirit-murdering my classmates and me for months. His actions toward us were because of the stereotypes and biases that he had before he got to our school. The behaviors of my peers reinforced his beliefs and caused him to be microaggressive towards us.

Spirit-murder, according to Love (2016), is “the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable structures of racism” (p. 2). I did not feel safe or protected from his wrath, considering he always included the group. He was not a nurturing type of teacher to his Black students, and he did not accept

us. He barely wanted to be around us, and he was physically afraid of us because of the fluid and moldable structure of racism. I deserved more as a child, we all did.

II: Guilty Adulthood - I Loved Them, But I Was Still Wrong

July 2011: Home Visits

“Setta, what are your dinner plans for this evening?” I was exhausted. My friend Kacy and I had been unloading boxes from our cars to the tables in my new classroom for the last three hours. My dinner plans were to take a nap. I responded to her question, “I know I’m not cooking, so something on the way home, it is.” Kacy responded, “Do you want to go with me on a Home Visit tonight? I absolutely love this family, and you will too. I taught the oldest daughter this past year and you will have the youngest this coming year. Their mother is such an amazing cook. Join me.” “Sold, let’s do it,” I responded.

I had just transitioned after teaching for three years from a large public school district to my first charter school district, and I was overwhelmed by the differences. There was mandated Saturday and summer school, work cell phones to help kids with homework up until 8:00 pm, and Home Visits to get to know students and their families to name a few. It was a bit much because I still considered myself to be a new teacher, but I had always wanted to be a teacher, and if these shifts benefited my new students in any way, I was down. There were some major adjustments that I had to make regarding my work/life balance, but overall, I was eager to make a difference, so I jumped in, feet first.

Kacy had worked with me at our placement school for two years and had made the transition to a charter school her third year in, while I remained for an additional year at our placement school. We missed each other and were able to maintain our close

friendship even though we no longer worked in the same building. Working down the hall from each other caused us to feel pure joy as we stayed late in our new school planning for our fourth year as teachers. Another major difference was that we could stay as late as we needed to at my new school, even overnight, which we had done quite often because we had the keys and alarm codes to the building. This is something that never would have happened in our public district.

We pulled up to the Martinez Family home, and the nerves that I felt immediately evaporated. This was because even though the house was small and well-maintained, it was extremely welcoming. Their yard was well-tended and bursting with colorful flowers. Last, Mrs. Martinez was standing at her door waiting for us with a look of kindness and nervousness in her eyes, and I could tell that she hoped we enjoyed ourselves. It was her sincerity that caused me to release my nerves and fully enjoy myself in an endeavor to build a new relationship with the family of one of my new students.

I had never experienced anything like this before, and I knew then that I would have a good relationship with them. Dinner was amazing! Both Mr. and Mrs. Martinez promised to offer me any support that I would need with their youngest daughter who was a total sweetheart. That next week, both girls and their myriad of friends came up to the school to help me get my room in order, and as the saying goes, all their many hands made the work light, fun, and fast. Not only did I get to know a large population of the school from this summer's support, but my classroom was also set up beautifully and summer school-ready.

August 2011: Safe Rules

It was my first day at my new school and I was eager to see my students again. I had seen quite a few of them that summer and taught them all the rules for our school. I was ready, I was comfortable, and I was happy. When reviewing our classroom rules, I reminded them of what was important. I told them that their safety was paramount to me and that I was their protector and advocate first and their teacher second. We discussed my zero-tolerance policy for bullying, and I shared my own personal stories of how I had been bullied. I proceeded through my PowerPoint presentation, paying special attention to the part about language.

I had the same rule since the beginning of my teaching career in Houston, and it stemmed from the fact that so many of the population spoke Spanish and I did not. I shared, each year, that I knew and spoke Spanish in high school, but I did not use it in college, and so therefore, I had lost it. Because of this, the rule was that none of my students were allowed to speak Spanish in my classroom. "I cannot protect you if someone is saying unkind words and/or threatening you. My classroom is and always will be your safe space, whenever you need me. To ensure that this remains true though, I must always understand what is being said in this space, so you cannot speak Spanish."

I made exceptions when I had students who did not speak English at all, and my *Buddy Students* had to sit with them and support them. If this was not the case, and they did it, I gently corrected my students when they spoke Spanish by reminding them, "Sweetheart, please, speak English in my classroom. Ms. Brown has to know what you all are saying, it is the only way that I can keep you safe." I felt horrible because so many times, it was just natural for them to use their native language, but I still pushed through

because my reasons were valid. I was never harsh or unkind, but I was firm regarding this rule because their safety mattered to me.

September 2011: They Agreed

It was Open House Night, and I was the *new kid on the block*. The way the schedule was set up, our Student Ambassadors were leading groups of parents from one class to the next, ensuring that parents were able to meet their children's teachers efficiently but quickly. I was used to this because it always happened, but on this night, it was staggeringly true: parents loved me! I loved them too. I was able to put parents at ease, connect with them, and share my story with them of how I grew up and how teaching had always been my destination and passion. I was always confident and skilled in classroom management and creating a positive and nurturing classroom environment. So, I continued to speak with confidence when I promised each round of parents that their children would always be safe with me and in my classroom. They understood my reasoning for my language rule, and they championed it. I never had any issues with any stakeholders regarding this rule throughout my teaching career. My students remained safe, and I highly doubt that anyone was bullied in my presence because of this; except that I realized years later that maybe I was the bully in my classroom. Not only the bully but also the spirit-murderer.

August 2022: My Good Intentions Mean Nothing If I'm Wrong

As I entered the second year of my doctoral program with a focus on *Social Justice*, I became reflective of my beliefs, biases, habits of mind, and teaching practices. The cohort group that I was a part of chose to leverage Dr. Bettina Love's work that

highlighted Spirit-Murder for our dissertation. Our plans and ideas changed multiple times over the months, but our theme remained the same. In reflecting, I faced a harsh truth from my past. I had consistently spirit-murdered my students. I meant well. I was their safe space at school and a trusted member of their village. I was welcome and often could be found in their homes during and beyond Home Visits for dinners and special events that mattered to their families. I loved them and was loved in return. I was a soccer coach, a beloved advisor to a group of eighth-grade girls who looked nothing like me, and a trusted confidant to many girls and boys. I mattered to these children and am still in contact with a lot of them today.

None of this changes the fact that I, myself, am guilty of spirit-murdering every one of my students. The premise of spirit-murder is to exhibit practices that communicate that someone is not enough and that who they are is not welcome. It is rooted in bias, privilege, authority, and racism. To think negatively of Black females, deeming them sassy instead of direct and advocates for themselves is to spirit-murder them. To assume that a tall Black male is great at basketball is to spirit-murder him. To tell my Hispanic students that their native language was not welcome in my classroom was to spirit-murder them, and this knowledge and awareness broke my heart. I was devastated by my actions. I struggled with this knowledge, and I told them that they were not good enough, that they were not enough, and that who they were could not be a part of my classroom. My reasons were valid, but still vehemently wrong. It took me learning and understanding the concept of spirit-murder, and considering my experience and emotions towards it, to realize that I was guilty of committing it.

I will always wonder if I unconsciously discriminated against my Hispanic students because I had been discriminated against so often as a Black person. I know from personal experience that a person who has been targeted and oppressed over a period of time can begin to internalize the lies that society teaches them, this is called internalized oppression. This happened to me. I grew up learning to consistently combat the feeling that I was inferior to my white classmates, and eventually, my white co-workers. My self-confidence has always been a battle that has teetered between believing that I was good enough versus not measuring up to others who seemed to be the standard. I cannot deny that even as an adult, this is something that I still struggle with. There is a saying that Black people have to be twice as good as our white counterparts to be deemed worthy. I wonder if, as a result of this way of thinking, this was why I was able to so easily spirit-murder another disenfranchised population. I hate this for myself, and I hate the damage that I caused my students.

My students meant the world to me, I loved them, but it was still spirit-murder. The Martinez sisters, complete angels, and great students, were spirit-murdered by me, and their parents considered me to be a member of their family. If I could go back in time and right my wrongs to each family, each student, and my colleagues, I would, but I simply can't. What I can do is advocate and enlighten others because knowledge is power, and to know better is to do better. As a result, I will always stand up and fight for Black and Brown children, most especially when they cannot do it themselves. I will always, in love, with respect and humility, enlighten others about my past mistakes to guide them down a different path, one that is inclusive, equitable, and rooted in valuing

others. I will also share how one can make mistakes all while having the best intentions for the students that they are serving. It is easy to continue doing wrong when you do not see the harm that you are causing others, but it takes strength, courage, and wisdom to reflect on your actions and their impact to begin to make changes. I am deeply sorry for the harm that I may have caused, but I am grateful for the experience and knowledge to do better as I move forward as a social justice champion for students of color.

III: Fierce Parenthood: I Am An Enraged Mother

April 2023: Recess Gate

I put the car in Park and got out while trying to school my face because I needed to hide the irritation that I was feeling. My son's pre-kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Hope, was waiting for me at the recess gate where the afterschool pickup was being held. I did not feel like engaging with her. It was clear that she did not like my kid, and as a result, I did not like her. I was over it. We only had six more weeks of school to go, and my husband and I had agreed to do our best to make it to the end without any major confrontations. I am an educator, so I know that no matter how hard you try, it can be difficult to separate your feelings toward a parent based on their behavior from your feelings toward the child. My Matthias was already on this woman's hit list, I could not and would not make things worse for my son, but this did not mean that I had time for her today, I did not. I quickly thought through different scenarios to get out of this conversation as fast as possible and practiced my fake smile while making my approach. *Stay calm, smile, grab your baby boy, and keep it moving. Be nice, it's Friday, you got this.* By the time she finished her first sentence, I knew that I absolutely did not have this.

“Hello Mrs. Brown, today Matthias used too much soap during our restroom break,” Mrs. Hope shared with a serious and stern face. *What! Why! Just why! I know she did not just say that he used too much soap. This cannot be what just came out of her mouth.* “I’m sorry, Mrs. Hope, but would you mind repeating that?” She genuinely thought that I did not hear her and shared in more detail, “Matthias used way too much soap today while in the restroom. I have told him on more than one occasion not to hold his hand under the soap dispenser more than once, but he continues to do this. He needs to quickly wash his hands and not hold up the entire class. He just plays too much in the bathroom.” I struggled to process this; I could not understand that this was what we were discussing. I tried hard to maintain a neutral expression. I was beyond irritated that she was attempting to ruin my day with something so trivial about my baby. *Casetta, you have to remember that he is your baby, not hers. She doesn't care about him. She does not like him. Somehow, this grown woman has something against your four-year-old. Address her concerns and get out of here!* I had to use positive self-talk to coach myself through this situation because I was close to not caring about professionalism.

I began with a question, “Mrs. Hope, did Matthias put soap in anyone’s eyes, or did he wipe the additional soap on the walls?” She guessed where I was headed, “No, of course not, he is never malicious. He just does not follow instructions very well.” I stopped myself from rolling my eyes because we were discussing a four-year-old child. “Okay . . . ,” I replied. She heard it, my irritation. I could not keep it hidden because this level of pettiness was too much for me. She proceeded to share, “I recorded him on my phone today during class while he was not listening.” This was absolutely the *wrong*

thing to say, and most importantly, do. Not only did I work for the district where she was employed, but she failed to realize that as an educator, I know that she is completely wrong right now. You cannot just record someone else's child. *This is just getting worse and worse, girl, proceed with caution.*

I did not proceed with caution. I responded by asking her rapid-fire questions because I was angry. "Can I ask what behavior warranted Matthias being recorded, and what are your intentions with the video? Where is the video? Can I see the video? Did you record my child using your personal cell phone or your work phone? Is your school leader aware that you recorded one of your students today? Did you contact his parents to request permission to record him? I know that the media release that *I* signed was for the school to be able to post pictures of him on the website of him engaged in activities to promote the school. This type of recording does not qualify as our consent."

I could see it, she was flustered and nervous, as she should have been. *Do not lean forward. Be very careful with how you are holding your body. Although it is tempting, do not give her a reason to say that she felt physically threatened in this moment. Do not give her a reason to think of you as an angry Black woman.* But I was through. I was an enraged Black woman. She had awakened my *Momma Bear* and was smart enough to look worried. I pushed past her anxiety because in that moment, all I could think about was my *four-year-old son* feeling anxious in her presence and not having his parents or a loving member of his village nearby as this woman proceeded to murder his spirit. This woman had recorded my child. How dare she. What did my son feel in that moment? Did

she sneak and do it or was he aware of her actions? I had so many questions and emotions flowing through me at this time, and I was struggling to contain it all.

In her efforts to backtrack, she shared, “No, Mrs. Brown, I don’t . . . I don’t even . . . I don’t even know where to begin or which question to answer first.” “Start at the beginning with this video of my child,” I suggested. My tone reflected how much I no longer cared about trying to be pleasant. She began looking around the playground nervously, seeking what, I did not know. If it was a co-worker, a few were close by because she orchestrated this entire interaction to publicly embarrass both my child and me. I continued to wait patiently as she became more flustered; she wanted an audience, and now she had one. Unfortunately for her, not only did I now have the time, but the tables had turned because she no longer had the upper hand in this embarrassing conversation. She was wrong and many of her co-workers had already overheard our conversation. She did not intend to offer me privacy during this conversation and now she needed it because she was bright red and about to cry, but that was not my problem. She did this to herself.

“Mrs. Hope, your recording of my son . . . ,” I prompted her again. “Well, I deleted the video, Mrs. Brown,” she shared. “How was it used prior to you deleting it?” I asked because I did not believe for one minute that she thought to record one of her students, proceeded to do it, and then just deleted it. Mrs. Hope’s eyes widened, but she did not continue. I waited in silence as she processed her guilt, fear, ignorance, and whatever else she was feeling at that moment. “Listen, to record a student for purposes of behavior illustration without appropriate permissions is unacceptable. You and I connect

on Class Dojo all the time. Why not send me a message letting me know that Matthias is having trouble following directions to seek out my support? You know that I will drop everything to come here to help. I will call and speak to him on the phone, as I have done in the past, to help redirect him. But to record him. You had malicious intent, and you are wrong. I intend to follow up with the principal because this is just too much, Mrs. Hope. You crossed the line.”

I was proud of myself at that moment. Not only did I push through the emotion that was clogging my throat and attempting to pour out of my eyes . . . not only did I refrain from using inappropriate language with her to show her how I really felt . . . not only did I not physically lash out at her . . . I maintained my composure. I spoke professionally and with passion. I controlled my emotions so as not to overtly frighten her, which is sad that I even had to consider this when she was the one who was wrong. I know from experience though how easily white people, especially white women, can misconstrue Black women’s behavior, even when they triggered it, intentionally or unintentionally. Understanding this and enjoying this moment of pride, I worked to wrap up this little non-delightful conversation quickly, but I was not fast enough, she dug her hole a lot deeper.

Bizarrely, Mrs. Hope chose this moment to avoid my questions and involve another teacher, “Well, I sent him to the Buddy Teacher (BT), a different one than my normal one because he might not listen to my usual BT, she’s too nice. I specifically sent him to Ms. Joseph because I know that because he is afraid of her he will obey her. I chose to do this today because he just had such a hard time focusing.” A Buddy Teacher

is a teacher who is nearby and is willing to allow a student to visit their class for a timeout or to cool down. Flashes of my son crossed my mind. My baby. He is filled with energy, curiosity, and Black boy joy. He listens the third time that you give him instructions if he is enjoying what he is currently doing, which happens a lot. This is a concern, yes, but with the right tone and a warm/firm demeanor, he will obey. He is such a sweetheart. He is incredibly compassionate, and such a brave leader. He is intelligent, both socially and academically. I was overwhelmed with emotion. I was definitely teary-eyed at this point because this woman just let me know that she intentionally caused my son fear. She and her co-worker, the other BT, intentionally intimidated my kid. *This teacher is murdering my son's spirit at this school, you've gotta get him out of here.*

I had to take several deep breaths, under her watchful gaze, because I was growing more and more concerned for my son at that moment. Not only was it clear that he was not liked, but I was starting to feel that she meant my child emotional harm. Any harm intended for my child was obviously going to be a big problem for me. She was his teacher. She was a white woman in a position of authority and misusing it. I could not tell if she was unaware or if this was intentional, but I knew that she was wrong and out of touch. She was not the best teacher for him. I knew this, but now, I *really knew* this to be true. I was frustrated, but instead of screaming, lashing out at her, or even addressing all of her heinous mistakes at this moment, I knew that I couldn't because I did not have the control needed to remain professional with her. I did not have the patience; my nerves were shot, and nothing good would come of this continued conversation, I was certain of it. I admit, I wanted to slap her, hard. I wanted to file a grievance against her. I wanted to

observe her in my role as the district's Culture and Climate Coordinator, and then coach her in a culturally responsive and relationship-building professional development session. She needed it because if this was how she treated little Black boys who love life, are curious and eager to explore everything, and need positive behavior reinforcement, she would continue to murder their spirits at a very young age.

The deep breaths did not help because I could still feel my blood boiling, I was furious. Not only did this woman instigate this silly situation today with soap, but she also proceeded to let me know that she illegally recorded my child while he was, in her opinion, misbehaving without his parent's permission. She then shared that she intentionally sent my child to an adult in the building for a period of time, removing him from his classroom environment to a space with someone who intentionally intimidates and scares him. She *deliberately* did *all* of this, in one day, to *a four-year-old child*. This happened to my son. While I was working, and not close by, he was afraid. This is one of the worst feelings as a mother, to not be close when your child is afraid or made to feel that way. My child is not perfect, no one is, but he did not deserve this. I was glad that the gate was separating us because I was no longer rational. I took a few more moments to continue collecting myself. I needed to or it would become an unbelievably bad altercation going from bad to the worst possible scenario.

"Mrs. Hope, I do not have the words for how I feel right now. I will follow up with the principal next week. Have a good weekend," I muttered while turning away from her. I began to call out to my son who was running near the slide with a friend. I called him a second time, and I could tell that he was sad to leave his friends and the

opportunity to play, but he raced over to me. When he exited the gate and got close, he gave me a big hug. I needed this hug because he gives good ones. His hug soothed my soul at a time when it felt very broken because to spirit-murder my son is to spirit-murder me as his mother. Turning away while reaching for his hand to walk to our car, I tried to name what it was that I was feeling. I did not have to think hard, because I knew what it was, it was fury. I worked to steady my nerves by asking my son about his day, knowing that his resilience would see him through, and praying that he had forgotten about the harm that his teacher perpetrated while trying to murder his spirit that day, hoping and wishing that he didn't even notice it.

I could not help but think, *what if one day (in the next seven weeks) she succeeds in her endeavors? What if she makes it through to the heart of him and his resilience suffers, or worse, he begins to remember all of this and starts to hate going to school? What if he begins listening to, believing, and internalizing her venom?* I didn't have the answers, only concerns. After we were safely buckled in and on the road, away from what felt like a crime scene involving my son's spirit, I called my husband. I let him know what happened. He was angry too. He immediately agreed that we needed to meet with the principal in the coming week. He also agreed with transferring our son to a different school because we would not make it to the end of the school year without an altercation worse than today, not without me stepping out of who I was as a professional. How did it come to this?

I mentioned it before and it's worth saying again, to spirit-murder my child is to spirit-murder me. Matthias was not the only one experiencing this, I was too. The hardest

part of this was knowing that someone disliked him strongly enough to do this because he is such a lovable and compassionate child. The second hardest part of this was all of the multitasking that I had to engage in on that day. I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience while coaching myself through this conversation. There were times when I had to remind myself that I could make it through this difficult encounter. There were other times when I had to forcefully tell myself to control my body's movements; telling myself not to move suddenly or not to hold my body a certain way so that Mrs. Hope couldn't say that she felt physically threatened. I had to be physically aware of the expression on my face. I did not want her to claim that I was being an angry Black woman, but I was, and justifiably so, but I still had to control it. This was spirit-murdering.

It is so exhausting to engage in a problematic conversation that is causing you pain, while another part of your brain is functioning in an entirely different capacity, working to stay calm. It was too much. Why can't I just exist? Why can't I just be? Why do I have to be worried about such trivialities during a conversation with my son's teacher? Why can't I just show up and be my unapologetic self? I'm sure Mrs. Hope was being herself! Why do I have to school my facial features, putting on a fake smile, and doing my best not to give back what she deserved when she was wrong? The energy that it takes to do all of this is strenuous and excessive. This was spirit-murdering. I am reminded that society would see me as inferior to this white woman, even though she is the one with malicious intent, they would still see me as wrong. My husband would ask me, "What did I do?" The principal, everyone, would wonder if I had lost my cool and

my innocence would be doubted. The pressure was so immense, yet this was exactly why I had to play the game, a game that is not fun and causes my child and me emotional damage is the epitome of being spirit-murdered.

August 2022: The Beginning

At the beginning of the school year, I went above and beyond, the way that I always do, with my son's teachers. Matthias is easily distracted and has a lot of energy, but he is not a bad child. He is extremely clever and can tell you a variety of facts about sharks or ocean life, superheroes, and dinosaurs. He is funny. He is generous. He is a leader. He is inquisitive. He is so many things, all of them positive. He is not what Mrs. Hope thinks of him.

I wrote Mrs. Hope and her teaching assistant, Mr. Parker, a handwritten note and included gift cards to Panera Bread on the first day of school. I sent these in my son's backpack. I always do stuff like this because I want to make deposits into our parent-teacher emotional bank account. As an educational partner, I know that withdrawals will come, they are a part of life. So, I do my best to be proactive. I am also an engaged parent who participates in the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). I send the requested snacks and school supplies when asked, I show up to every event offered as my schedule permits, and I volunteer to chaperone field trips. My husband and I are great partners in our son's education. None of this stopped the barrage of complaints from Mrs. Hope four weeks into the school year.

They started small and few but quickly escalated. Mrs. Hope began the school year with, "Mrs. Brown, Matthias had to sit on the bench during recess because he had

unsafe hands and arms. I mean, he has gotta learn to control himself. He is not trying to hit other people, but he definitely does. I make sure he walks beside me so that he does not swing his arms and make his environment unsafe.” Matthias was one of two Black boys in a classroom of fifteen students. He was also the tallest student in the class. I recognized that Mrs. Hope saw him as a threat because of his size, and as a result of her lack of classroom management skills and inability to connect with my child, she thought and acted negatively toward him. She picked at everything he did, making minor and normal childlike behaviors into large and trivial situations. I also knew that she was judging him based on the color of his skin. I knew this because I saw her students and knew that my child was not the only *busy* child on her roster. I knew this because of her passive-aggressive actions toward my son, my intuition as a mother, and the vibe she gave off. She had it out for my baby, and I had to advocate for and champion him because there was no way she was going to get away with this.

I began tracking her behavior early on. Mothers have a sixth sense where they can quickly discern if someone cares for their child or not, and I knew early on that Mrs. Hope did not. Or at least, not deeply; she hugged him, took pictures with him, and could be kind to him, most especially when I was present. She gently disciplined him, being warm and firm when I was nearby. It was during my absences that I was growing increasingly concerned about. She was starting to lose her credibility with me; I could not trust her version of happenings, and unfortunately, Matthias did not know how to relay (fully) what had taken place.

The teaching assistant, Mr. Parker, would always find times to share that what I was being told by Mrs. Hope was inflated and that my son was one of his favorite students. He was an older, Black, retired teacher who had returned to the field because of how Black children were being treated. He shared that ensuring that Black children were treated fairly in schools and his love for them is what brought him back to the classroom. I felt hopeful about Mr. Parker being in Matthias's classroom. I knew he would not allow any harm to come to my son. I felt like he had a member of his village nearby, but in October, Mr. Parker was reassigned to other duties within the school and no longer Mrs. Hope's teaching assistant. He later confirmed that it was because he was advocating for Matthias, and Mrs. Hope did not like it. How devastating and devious. Mr. Parker still found his ways to connect with and check on Matt. He would also select him for special roles during assemblies and performances. For example, at the Winter Wonderland Concert, Matthias was selected by Mr. Parker to come up and perform a drum solo. Mr. Parker refused to allow my son's spirit to be murdered. Mr. Parker will always be a welcome member of my child's village because he stepped in and advocated for him, and he cares deeply for him.

October 2022: A "C" in PE

It was during Parent Teacher Conferences that I discovered that Matthias had *earned* a C in Physical Education (PE), not on a progress report but on his report card where it was too late to remedy the situation. Mrs. Hope stated, "Matthias earned a C in PE because he doesn't follow the rules. He plays too much and does not know how to behave when the games are ending or wrapping up." This is what Ms. Wilshire, the PE

teacher, has shared with me.” Mrs. Hope described my son’s *earning* of an average grade in this manner, without warmth or care in her tone. I can only imagine that she assumed that because of the color of our skin, we would not care. She was wrong, we absolutely cared, but her lackluster tone was not my biggest concern, it was the PE teacher who I was concerned about. An average grade that was *earned* and she never once reached out to me to discuss this. She felt comfortable sharing this through another person as a message for me. To say that I was unhappy was an understatement because this was spirit-murdering at its finest, working to dig deeply into his academic record, early on, to plant harmful seeds of him being average. Not on my watch!

I was appalled and approached the PE teacher during car-line pickup after school that next week and asked her if we could meet to discuss my son’s grade. I am willing to admit that this might not have been the best time for her to speak to me. She was busy on duty ensuring that students were safely getting into cars. I will own this. She blew me off and said, “Oh, it’s just a C, he will be fine.” Wrong type of response for me, but probably a normal one for her for a little Black boy that she thought had too much energy. I knew immediately that she was a nice racist. In this case, she was a white person who chose to work in an urban setting, but she did not have Black students’ best interests at heart. What other reason would a white teacher blow off a Black parent attempting to discuss their child’s grade without offering options of how to connect to discuss the situation further? As a teacher, you are responsible for communicating with parents when there is a concern with one of your students. You are accountable for sharing how a student, a

four-year-old student especially, *earned* a C in your PE class. Did she think I would back down and accept her inappropriate response without a fight? If so, she was wrong.

Of course, I followed up in writing and sent an email that same week with my husband copied on it. I asked for a copy of the list of assignments and his grades for the semester. She was unable to provide this, and I could tell that she was nervous. She responded by saying that this type of information would be difficult to share because it was not in her gradebook; she said that she just took notes throughout class. She had chosen to copy the principal on the email. I replied that she must be able to prove that my son earned a C in her class and that I was seeking the documentation. The principal replied by requesting to meet. I went and the PE teacher had a set of notes that showed different numbers that represented my son's efforts in class while learning Pre-Kindergarten Physical Education. He apparently was not good at playing tag, freeze tag, and other games developmentally appropriate for his age. When I asked clarifying questions, she shared that he would get upset when ending a game because he always wanted to keep playing. He would tag others when he was not *it* and struggled with some specific tasks such as lifting his legs to touch his knee while crossing his arms one over the other. I was baffled by her reasoning for the grade, and I knew in that moment that once again, my son was being spirit-murdered. Unfortunately, I was too.

As I listened to illogical statements regarding my son's behavior that were now impacting his grades, I thought about how I had never even heard of Pre-Kindergarten students receiving letter grades. I considered how a four-year-old earned an average grade in the class where they were supposed to expend their energy. At this moment, I felt

embarrassed that Matthias was choosing to play a little too much and not follow his teacher's instructions for the games played in class. I was starting to feel judged by yet another white woman for his behavior. I felt overwhelmed because I needed to put extra pressure on my son to be on his best behavior while in the presence of this teacher. The other part of me simply wanted to scream because I was falling into the psychological trap of believing what I was being told. I needed to remember that almost every little boy in her class likely exhibited these same behaviors, but my child was being called out for it. I also needed to consider the fact that Ms. Wilshire and Mrs. Hope had probably discussed Matthias and that this was a joint attack. Mental exhaustion crept in as tears wanted to leak out. I was aggravated and my mood, which was already in a bad place, deteriorated further, but I tapped into an inner strength that I forgot I had and I began to advocate and defend my child because enough was enough.

I shared with Ms. Wilshire a few of the ways that my son learned best and tips on how to connect with him. For instance, anyone who has conversations with Matthias would know that he loves Spider-Man and wishes to be addressed as "Peter Parker." As a result of this, I often remind him to be a good listener and to behave because he's Spider-Man, a superhero for our city, and he must listen so that he can know how to help others. This works every single time because he takes his Spidey-responsibilities very seriously. This is called building a relationship with a child and their parents so that you can gain insight into how to connect with them. However, you have to want this, and Ms. Wilshire nor Mrs. Hope were interested in connecting with my child because they had written him off.

I told Ms. Wilshire that my husband and I are her partners, and if there is misbehavior that hinders his learning or the safety of others, as she had stated, we are only a phone call, text, or email away, but she has to make us aware. I let her know that I thought it was unfair for us to be left in the dark and only made aware by the permanent grade on his report card. I kindly shared that it was ludicrous for a four-year-old to receive a C in physical education, most especially if he seemed to have a lot of energy. I told her that he was a great leader and that if she allowed him to lead some of the exercises, I was certain he would do it well. I shared that he does well with positive praise because he aims to please others. She agreed that none of his behavior was ever malicious, only that he struggled to listen. I reminded her that it is my job and hers to connect, as needed, to ensure that he is successful and that I felt that he had been failed in this first semester. I let her know that I did not want a repeat of this situation to take place again this year.

The feeling of being spirit-murdered alongside my child was relentless, even after the meeting ended. Although I pulled myself together and handled things well, I was emotionally distraught when I got to my car. In the meeting, I found myself having to multitask again because I was pretty upset by Ms. Wilshire's actions, but I had to remain level-headed enough to coach her through how to connect with my child. I had to give her tips that she never asked for, but should have, on how to engage him on what he is interested in. It is mentally and emotionally draining having to be positive in situations where white people in positions of authority got to focus on the negative. I worked hard to build positive relationships with all of Matthias's teachers, making deposits into our

emotional bank accounts, and here they were, withdrawing all willy-nilly without a care in the world. Why was I the only one that cared about this, about him? This was spirit-murder at its finest, and it hurt.

I was fed up with coaching white women on how to treat my son. When you choose to work in an urban school district, and you know that you don't care about Black kids, you should seek training on how to be more culturally responsive, and if you are not interested in doing that, then you should retire. Go and seek excellence elsewhere in a profession that does not involve you having a direct and negative impact on the lives of Black children. Although I felt the meeting was productive, I still knew that the underlying root cause of her comfortably *giving* my child a C was not being addressed. This reminded me of a dissertation that I had come across because it focused on how the education system perpetuates and disenfranchises Black children. Near the end of the dissertation, the authors named the implications of their work:

We demand White teachers see their students of color, reducing unproductive and devaluing colorblind ideologies. Educators must be willing to feel discomfort in order to grow in their knowledge of racism and school systems must provide on-going quality professional development related to bias and racism and overall school climate reform (Boateng et al., 2021, pp. 214).

Fortunately for Ms. Wilshire, she was a fast learner and learned in the first semester to stop playing with me and my child. From that day on, Ms. Wilshire began sharing (whenever she saw me) how Matthias was progressing. She also began sending home index cards that communicated his behavior in class both good and concerning. On

these note cards, she included happy faces or sad faces. Also, from that day forward, my son earned A's in PE. I know, though, that this only happened so that she could keep me out of her hair; she did not like confrontation, and I did not mind it when it came to my son's well-being or his grades. She did not want to again encounter the discomfort of being asked to show how a student had earned a particular grade in her class. She did what she needed to do to keep things copacetic with me, smiling, regularly communicating, and making minimal effort. I couldn't help but wonder what happened to the other Black students, if any, whose parents didn't speak up like I did . . . was she spirit-murdering them too?

As an educator, I know that other educators talk to each other. I know that Mrs. Hope and Ms. Wilshire had conversations about my child and his behavior. I know that they wanted to ensure that his behavior was reflected in his grades. I know that Ms. Wilshire did not reach out to my husband or me to share her concerns because she did not care about Matthias. I also learned that none of the other students who exhibited similar behavior to my son's received C's. I gathered this information surreptitiously by connecting with other parents in my son's class. Ms. Wilshire spirit-murdered my child in PE class, and it showed up on his report card. My husband and I were more attentive to our son's progress and corrective of his behavior in PE class when we received an index card that indicated that he had not behaved that day, but to go from a letter grade of a C to an A overnight is unheard of. I know from my experience as an educator that some Black parents re-experience their own school trauma and choose not to speak up or advocate for their children as a result of this. When this is the case, racist white people in authority

within schools take advantage of this. This would not happen to my son ever again with Ms. Wilshire, because fortunately, she retired at the end of the school year. She needed to.

January 2023: Behavior Tracking A Four-Year-Old

Things were not so easy with Mrs. Hope though because she began using a behavior tracker for Matthias in the second quarter. I asked Mrs. Hope about this and learned that Matthias was the only student that a behavior tracker was being used for. This was not an index card but instead was a double-sided full sheet of behavioral data collected throughout the day. I appreciated this level of communication, even if I felt it was excessive for such a young child. I was also not stupid. I recognized that this was her new tactic to document my child's behaviors to either build a case for a special education or health label or for class removal. The behavior tracker had a table with two columns and a lot of rows indicating the class or location of the behavior on the left side of the paper, and to the right, there were columns for the specific descriptions of his behavior or notes. For example, it listed "hallway" to the left and then to the right, "unsafe hands." It would say "nap time" to the left and then to the right, "went to sleep immediately," or "played for five minutes before getting to sleep." The first two weeks, Mrs. Hope included positive behaviors as well as when Matthias needed redirecting, but as the weeks continued, I noticed that she only began to include behaviors that did not meet her expectations. She would leave many of the spaces blank, even if he had great behavior and or had met the expectations for the class or location.

I enquired about this by writing a message on the bottom of the tracker after initialing it one evening, which was the protocol we had in place. "Oh, Mrs. Brown, I

cannot write down everything that he does well because he is a really good student, and he does a lot of things well.” Well, if that was the case, how do you have so much time to write what he is doing wrong? This did not seem fair, it was also a reminder that she did not care about him. So, I began to write in every open space that she left blank, “If you have time to write the misbehavior in great detail, please take the time to do the same for his good behavior.” We both know that as educators, children need to hear what they are doing well and what behaviors they need to change; this is the opposite of spirit-murdering, this is actually spirit-building, and it is necessary. This is a part of any child’s development. Eventually, she stopped sending the trackers home. It was her choice, but I am willing to guess that she was frustrated because I was writing back and advocating for positive feedback along with constructive feedback. He’s four years old.

Oddly enough, I still made sure she had a great Christmas gift weeks before and a great teacher appreciation gift in May that included baseball tickets to a Cardinals game. I would never do anything to place my son in emotional danger, so I worked hard to ensure that I kept my cool with Mrs. Hope throughout the school year. I smiled, connected, gave, and did everything I could to play the game and keep my son emotionally safe. This is what spirit-murdering is, it is surviving and trying through trauma. I was embarrassed and ashamed every time we met, and she told me that my son’s self-control was lacking. Honestly, I read that I was lacking as a parent, and I felt looked down upon. She did not care that I was in graduate school and was exhausted in the evenings. She did not care that she caused me to doubt myself and become insecure as a parent. It did not matter to her that my anxiety increased exponentially whenever I saw the school’s name on my

phone. But none of this mattered because I would continue to do whatever I had to do for Matt to be okay while he was in Mrs. Hope's classroom. So it was unfortunate that I tried really hard not to, but I had to speak up when I noticed that she was once again up to causing my son emotional harm.

February 2023: Enough Was Enough

On Valentine's Day, Mrs. Hope called me to say that Matthias had been bitten by another student, but that he had done nothing wrong. She shared that he had gone to the nurse and gotten ice and that he was fine, and back to his normal self. She then attempted to discuss his behavior with me, but I stopped her and refocused her on my son's care. To me, that is not something we will breeze through just to get to the real reason you called me. I had follow-up questions. I asked her to have the nurse sanitize the bitten area and apply ointment to his skin. She assured me that the skin hadn't been broken and that there was no need to do this. I reiterated my request until it was carried out. Only then did I allow her to proceed with what she felt she needed to say.

She said that Little Matthias had been having a very good day and that this altercation caused him to slip into past behaviors of not listening. I immediately began to coach her and shared that when small traumas occur, it can alter one's day. I told her to imagine heading in to work and there is suddenly a ton of traffic on the highway, it might cause one's good spirits to fall. She did not seem interested in what I said, but I did not care. A few hours later, she notified me via a Class Dojo message that Matthias would not be able to attend the Valentine's Day party that afternoon with his class because of his misbehavior. It was smart of her to send it via the social media application that the district

used; she thought that sharing it there would cause me to not see it quickly and that her consequence would be carried out. To her misfortune, I am very attuned to what goes on with my child and so when I get a notification about him, I stop and pay attention. In this case, I did not respond to her message, I immediately went up to the school because enough was enough!

I was exhausted, hurting for my kid and myself, and just sick of the foolishness. This was making me feel like I was crazy because I was starting to believe her. I was beginning to feel like I was a bad mother, like I was not doing enough, and like I would never get this parenting right. I felt vulnerable, and like I no longer trusted my son in her care. She was not making good judgments about him and so I was done. This spirit-murdering business was killing me. Literally, I felt like my soul just could not take it any longer. All this because she could not seem to find a way to love my baby. What next! I was sick of it, no more embarrassment, doubt, shame, or feeling chastised as a parent. No more coaching white educators on connecting with my kid. No more! I did not have a plan thought out, I was just going to arrive and act. But God.

The principal just happened to be in the hallway and noticed my facial expression and body language. She immediately approached me as I was making my way to the main office to sign in and then to Matthias's classroom. Fortunately, I respect her a lot, so I stopped and allowed her to talk to me. I shared what had happened with the bite and the change in Matthias's behavior, and that he was about to miss out on his class party. He had been really excited to pass out treats for his classmates at this party and now he could not attend. By this point, I'm crying crocodile tears as I let it all hang out. The principal

let me know that someone overheard and witnessed what took place with my child and that they had already advocated on his behalf. She assured me that he would absolutely be able to attend the Valentine's Day party with his class. I couldn't stop crying even though she had just shared that the situation was fixed. The weight of someone picking on your child is heavy, it is overwhelming, and it causes stress. I was so frustrated with the lack of care and support for my son from his teacher. I just felt that she did not see him and that she did not want to. She did not see the Matthias that I knew, and she was not giving him a chance. She did not consider that the situation with the other student had caused him some trauma and disrupted his behavior for that day or for the moment, and she was planning to punish him and take a class community-building activity away from him.

March 2023: Show-and-Tell

Three weeks later, Matthias's class was having a Show-and-Tell. Matthias had just received a Spider-Man Electronic Reader (e-reader) for his fifth birthday. It came with eight books and was one of his favorite new activities. He enjoyed listening to the e-reader read the books and knew when to turn the page. He and I decided that this would be the perfect thing to take to school and show to his friends. We had practiced and he was ready; even I was excited about the upcoming classroom activity. When I picked him up from school that day I went into his classroom and asked how it went. Matthias looked sad, which immediately pulled at my heartstrings, and shared that he did not get a chance to go. I was completely confused. I asked the new teaching assistant what had taken place, but she held up a finger, nonverbally asking me to wait as she was busy writing

notes on a sheet of paper. Once she was finished, she said, “I’m sorry, I was just documenting his behavior from today.” This caught me off guard because she had just finished writing two pages full of notes. *Hmmm, this is their new game, document his behavior and ensure that I am unaware that it is taking place as it is no longer being sent home on behavior trackers. Here we go again.*

Infuriated, I just looked at her, and it took me a second to even begin talking. My thoughts filtered through my mind in numbers . . . 1. My kid was excited to share his new toy today. 2. He missed out on a class activity that was developmentally appropriate and caused him to feel joy in learning. 3. He somehow lost the opportunity to engage because of some unknown reason, but it warranted two whole pages of notes, and I was never contacted. 4. How do I revive my own spirit as they consistently murder his?

I tried again by repeating my questions to her, “What happened today? Why didn’t he participate?” Ms. C. replied, “Well, Matthias was too eager to share, and he kept interrupting other people by raising his hands to ask if it was his turn yet.” *Why are these people in education? How?* I took a deep breath and then said, “Did you have him come sit near you since you saw his behavior as disruptive? Or did you ask his classmates if he could go next after who was speaking finished since he seemed so excited . . . maybe the group would make an exception for their teammate today. You could have said something like, ‘Hey Team, it is not Matthias’s turn just yet, but he really wants to go. Are we ok if he goes next? Instead of figuring out a way to help him, you chose to take the opportunity away from him altogether. How does that make sense?’”

She did not have the answers because there weren't any good ones. I could tell that she was carrying out the orders of someone else. I wondered if she even knew my child or if she only knew what someone told her to think of him. I let her know that she needed to begin thinking for herself and that she needed to be open to ways that she could better support her students. I asked to see Mrs. Hope, but she had to leave early that day, causing Ms. C. to feel overwhelmed in the class alone. I told her that I was tired of them working to quell his zest for learning and sharing. No one took the time to coach him on patience. Because it was Matthias, they instantly disciplined him unfairly, with no restorative practices or compassion in sight.

One week later, I was dropping Matthias off at *beforecare* so that I could get to my 8:00 am meeting on time. I signed him in and then went to give him a hug and a kiss. As I approached him from behind, I overheard the conversation he was engaged in. One of his classmates, who I thought was a close friend, said to him, "I don't want to play with you anymore because you're a bad boy." My heart dropped. "I'm not a bad boy, I'm a good boy," Matthias replied. His former friend said, "No, you aren't, I heard Mrs. Hope tell Ms. C. that you needed to go sit in timeout because you were a bad boy." I intervened at this point, "Ryan, enough," I said in a gentle voice. Although I was upset that he had overheard an inappropriate adult conversation and chose to act on it, possibly hurting my son's feelings first thing in the morning by repeating it, Ryan was still a child. I told him, "What you heard was not kind, and what you are saying right now isn't either. Matthias and you are friends. Be nice to each other, no fighting, please." He apologized.

I left before I found Mrs. Hope to tell her a few things because I had a meeting to get to. Unfortunately, Mrs. Hope was parking in the lot and exiting her car as I left the building. I risked being late and shared the encounter with her. The guilt in her eyes said it all. You cannot talk about a child in front of other children because they can go back and repeat things and cause others undue harm. Grow up. Her eyes told me that she had, in fact, had that conversation in earshot of children and that she unknowingly caused my son harm because another child instigated that situation on him, first thing in the morning. She knew she was responsible. At this point, she did not deny it. She apologized and promised to talk to Ryan. I told her to do better and to be better.

I emailed the principal and asked her if we could meet, once again, to discuss Little Matthias's social and emotional well-being at the school. I was losing faith and regretting trusting the district that I worked for with my most precious gift. It was sad because I was beginning to feel hopeless. I needed someone to care for my baby. I was not sugarcoating my child's behavior, but the honest truth was he was being bullied by adults because he was Black and not a meek and mild kid. Everyone could admit that he was not malicious, just curious, eager, and playful. He was also five years old at that point. He was a kid, and the building was full of children just like him, but for some reason, he was consistently being singled out.

I liked the school principal. I had known her for a few years and respected her work ethic and her steady calm in what could seem like chaos. It was clear that she loved kids. She was a Black woman and seemed successful and seasoned in running a tight ship. If all of this was true, then how was it that my son kept getting chewed up and spit

out in this supposedly well-oiled machine? I did not get it, and I needed answers. I was at my breaking point. I began to be anxious when I saw a district number on my phone, but it would just be an automated call about an upcoming district event. It was too much emotional distress, and something had to give.

I met with the principal and shared with her all of my concerns over the past few months, from his first report card, the behavior tracker only being one-sided in sharing the data, the intent behind that . . . I let it all out. I shared that I thought that many of the teachers were not here for Black children. I did not want to tell her that some of them were just nice racists, but I felt it to be true. I didn't tell her because I was concerned that she wouldn't believe me, even though I trusted her. I doubted myself and wondered if I was just being *that* mom or whiny. I also know how hard school leadership is and I didn't want to cause a disarray within her building, but I should have spoken up. Fortunately, without me doing so, she still understood me, she saw what was happening. She and I had a really good relationship as coworkers, and I could tell that she was in an uncomfortable position. I did not care at that point because my son's safety was more important as his spirit was being murdered in plain sight. She let me know that she would absolutely keep her eye on things and that at this point in the year, with less than two months to go, I just needed to stay on top of monitoring things. She believed that we could make it to the end of the school year and have a fresh start next year. I wanted Matthias to stay at his school, with his friends, where he felt comfortable. I couldn't help but think that maybe I was blowing these situations out of proportion and just being sensitive because he was my baby. I agreed to give it another go. Months later, I wondered about what made me

second guess myself. What caused me to have those doubts? All I could come up with was that the spirit-murdering was so ingrained that I was questioning if it even existed, even though I knew that it did.

April 2023: Done

Two weeks later, the encounter and the recess gate took place. I tried; I really did. I did not want to be that parent. I didn't want to come off as a problem, but when the petty soap incident, unauthorized recording, and intentional emotional bullying situation happened, I was DONE. I reached out to the principal and shared with her what took place at the recess gate during pickup that Friday afternoon. My husband and I were present for the meeting that next week, and she shared that she too was extremely concerned by the behavior of the teacher and what she shared. She apologized. We forgave her because she wasn't the person that was guilty, we had a prior relationship and I respected her, and she even admitted that she saw it too and began addressing it. Regardless of this, we still told her that Matthias would not be able to close out the school year with his class because we were pulling him and taking him somewhere else. She said she did not want to see him go because he was such a valuable member of the school community. We let her know that it did not feel like it.

I let her know that there was not anyone in the building who loved my child enough. My husband told her that we needed a special teacher, someone who could love our little boy, someone who would not allow or cause him harm. She asked me to reconsider and suggested that we go upstairs to observe a teacher who could possibly be Matthias's teacher next school year. I made eye contact with my husband, and I could tell

that we were both just humoring her at this point. We went and watched Mrs. Jason engage in warm/firm behavior while teaching her kindergarteners. She was patient, loving, and kind. She corrected children with compassion, was soft-spoken, and very sweet. I immediately fell in love with her. The culture and climate that she created within her classroom was one that I wanted for my son. I could tell that she could see her students and that they mattered to her. She seemed perfect for our little guy, and I was intrigued.

The principal assured me that if we could just make it to the end of the school year with everyone being hypervigilant and working together to ensure that Matthias was emotionally safe and doing what he needed to do. She said that she would speak with his teachers and remind them to try and understand that he's a child, would make mistakes, and would always have his level of energy, and that's okay. There was hope for the next school year. I was scared to hope, but I did hope; I felt reassured about my son's future at the school.

We made it to the end of the school year with only minor bumps along the way. I could tell that the principal had a conversation, or several, with Mrs. Hope, as Matthias was starting to get good reports with no concerns shared. The principal began going out of her way to call and share positive incidents with Matthias and that made me feel better. When my son is having good days, I am having good days. Once, she had called to share that Matthias had just done the school announcements over the intercom with a group of his peers and that he did an amazing job. She said he was really excited and took the responsibility very seriously. It was small check-ins like this that let me know that he was

still thriving even in the midst of consistent attempts to murder his spirit that school year. Parents want to hear the positives too, we need to. It builds credibility when I know you have good things to share about my baby. If you only mention negative anecdotal data regarding my child, then you are easy to read because you are quickly letting me know you dislike my child.

Mrs. Hope calmed down, I'm sure because she was told to, and she didn't bother me too much regarding any other misbehavior that she felt my son was engaging in. I will never forget how she treated him though and what she thought of him that led to her actions and behaviors during that harrowing year. I am thrilled that God created my child with strength of character, confidence, and resilience. To this day, he hugs Mrs. Hope because he is an innocent child and is loving, he is unaware of how she behaved, the things that she did, and her true intentions. I am glad that he is unaware, because his world is one that is positive. My son's world is filled with joy, curiosity, compassion, and exuberance. His Black Boy Joy is palpable. I do not want him learning this early that there are people out here that will be threatened by how tall he is, by the tone of his voice, and by the color of his skin. He will face these realities, unfortunately, soon enough, but for now, he gets to be the child that he is, unscathed by the madness of a pre-Kindergarten teacher, and loved by his mother that will do everything in her power to protect him.

March 2024: Mrs. Jason

Almost one year later, Matthias is currently enjoying his favorite new teacher, Mrs. Jason, who has a welcome place in our hearts. She is a beloved member of

Matthias's village because she genuinely values everything about him and finds the good in his personality and inquisitiveness. She finds joy in his presence, logic, and humor. She builds upon his social intelligence and skills. She does not shy away from correcting him, but when she does, she does it with kindness and dignity. She doesn't believe in shaming him, and she allows him to be his best self. She attends church events just to witness Matthias emcee church programs because she believes in his leadership. She cares about him outside of the classroom. She will attend his future birthday parties and graduations well beyond kindergarten. I refer to her as his Godteacher because she is like a second mom and truly loves him so much. We love her because she *sees* him.

Chapters 6 and 7 Synopsis

Counter-Stories: White Researchers

The next two stories serve as examples of how two white educators spirit-murdered Black students in their schools. These two researchers share how their white privilege caused them to be unaware of their damaging and traumatic practices toward Black students entrusted in their care. Although they were unaware of their actions at the time that they were taking place, they still admit to causing emotional harm and are holding themselves accountable for it. From spirit-murdering to advocacy, they share their uncomfortable journey of how reflecting on their actions and examining their practices have led them to make changes to be more mindful so that they can consciously make efforts to better support, engage with, and teach Black children in their future.

Chapter 6: Coming to Terms with My White Identity

Chapter Introduction:

My name is Sarah Guilfoyle, and I am a white researcher and educator. This is my example of how I engaged in spirit-murder throughout my teaching career. It is also an explanation of my journey through white racial identity development. I acknowledge that these stories are not the only times I have spirit-murdered Black students nor does sharing them absolve me from the harm I have caused. What I do hope to accomplish by sharing these stories and taking responsibility for my actions is to validate and affirm the Black students I have harmed and others who have been harmed by white educators and to encourage other white people to examine and own their behavior to prevent future harm.

White Racial Identity Development

Many white people believe that racism is a problem that people of color must fight against, not something that they, too, are a part of and must work to dismantle. Dr. Beverly Tatum posits, “Why should Whites who are advantaged by racism *want* to end that system of advantage? What are the *costs* of that system to them?” (p. 77). What many people in an oppressive system don’t understand is what Isabel Wilkerson (2020) says in her book *Caste*, “A caste system makes a captive of everyone within it” (p. 374). I can now see that the short-term benefits of white supremacy do not outweigh the long-term damage it causes everyone, not just Black people. I did not previously understand my role in my county’s systemic racism upheld by commitment to white supremacy, due to a lack of historical knowledge and lack of awareness of my own behavior, but now that I am aware, I am committed to unlearning this behavior and

interrupting racism when I see it. By examining how I contribute to oppression and what I can do to prevent further harm, I have also researched what makes some white people want to examine their racism and pursue a healthy white identity, and what causes many to stay stuck in their cultural conditioning.

Three years ago, I had never heard the term “spirit-murder.” When I first read about this in Bettina Love’s *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, I thought the term was a bit extreme, the murdering of someone’s spirit. When I tell other white people about it, they usually look taken aback or uncomfortable. I assume they are so uncomfortable because racism is uncomfortable to talk about. It is taboo to discuss it, let alone admit to being an explicit participant in it, but it is impossible to live in our racist system without participating, consciously or unconsciously. Knowing that this is difficult to come to terms with, I can understand why white people balk when I mention spirit-murder. It is extreme, harsh, cruel, and unjust, but we have done it. It is much easier to deny this than it is to reflect, consider, and contemplate our actions in this context to Black people.

As I have gotten more familiar with the idea, I realized that as a teacher, I have been guilty of contributing to the slow killing of students’ spirits in their educational experiences. For example, by arranging seating charts to keep students of color away from each other for easier classroom management, I was keeping students from feeling a sense of belonging and support from the very few people who looked like them in the class. Another example would be unconscious or conscious biased grading. Grading Black students’ work harder because of a subconscious belief that they deserved it or easier because I subconsciously pitied them was harmful to their grades, development as

a reader or writer, or self-esteem. This “racial weathering is the result of systemic injustice—which is not just policies but the million daily cuts inflicted by unaware white people, including progressives” (DiAngelo, 2022, p. 48). I am one of the white people inflicting these cuts, not just through my own classroom practices but by also upholding school procedures like reclassification or unnecessary discipline referrals. After twenty-two years of listening to students tell me their stories and although they trust me enough to tell me about harm caused by other white people, I know that I have also contributed.

Hearing these stories from my students has caused me to want to analyze the tendencies of myself and other white people. I decided to use Dr. Janet Helms’ (1990) White Racial Identity Model. Helms, a groundbreaking pioneer in the field of counseling psychology, created a model for white racial identity development which has helped further our discussions about race today. I wanted to explore my journey using the stages of her model. First is the abandonment of racism which includes Contact, Disintegration, and Reintegration. Next is defining a positive white identity including Pseudo-Independent, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy. I decided to define these stages as I understood them and reflect on if and when I had experienced each of the stages. Prefacing each of the stages, Helms includes a quote by Robert Terry (1981): “To be white in America is not to have to think about it. Except for hard-core racial supremacists, the meaning of being White is having the choice of attending to or ignoring one’s own whiteness.” This describes me before becoming a teacher. As white people are the most segregated of all races in the US, it is common for many of us to grow up with

limited interaction with people of color and to believe ourselves to be the “norm” of society. Most white people can live their lives without examining what it means to be white. Examining it can lead to discomfort, guilt, shame, and anger among other things which makes ignorance pleasant. However, sometimes it is unavoidable. Had I not become a teacher, I think I could have gone through my whole life without examining my race. There were a few incidents at my first job that caused me to question my Whiteness, but I was able to quickly sweep them under the rug and forget about them because, in my personal life, I was not around Black people. It was much easier for me to take on an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality at that time, and not think about them unless they were directly in front of me, as in my classes.

Contact

The first stage of white racial identity development, Contact, is encountering the idea or actuality of Black people. I think I entered this stage in kindergarten or first grade. In looking at demographic statistics for the years I was in school, my school district in south St. Louis County, MO, was around 80% white and 20% Black due to the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC), a program that allowed students who lived in St. Louis City to be transported by bus to attend St. Louis County public schools. Although I had seen and known Black people before entering school, kindergarten was the first time I was aware that Black people might have different experiences than me. For one thing, I remember noticing that the Black students at my school didn't live in my neighborhood and didn't ride my bus. I also noticed they didn't participate in Girl Scouts, the talent show, the school carnival, or other after-school activities. This continued into middle

school, high school, and college. While I did have Black friends during this time, I always felt an invisible divide between “us” and “them.” I now understand the systemic racism that created an unconscious bias within me: the VICC program was telling them and me that their schools were bad and ours were good; their neighborhoods were bad and ours were good. I had created a very sad picture of what Black life looked like in the city. The only examples of Black life I had seen were through TV shows like *The Cosby Show* (a brownstone in Brooklyn, New York) and *Punky Brewster* (an apartment in Chicago, IL). In reality, I knew that Black people at my school lived “in the city” of St. Louis. My experience with the city included trips to the zoo, the botanical gardens, and Busch Stadium for baseball games, but we didn’t visit residential areas. My parents told us that the city was dangerous and that we needed to be more vigilant when we were there. They would not have allowed my sister or me to go to a Black friend’s house if we had asked. I guess I thought it must be bad if the kids there had to leave their neighborhoods and come to our school, and I was not allowed to go there. I never asked about their lives because I did not have any Black friends who I felt comfortable asking and did not have enough knowledge of the city to know one part versus another. I think I often thought many Black people were living in extreme poverty, and I didn’t understand what that meant. I didn’t know that successful Black people who wanted to give their kids a better educational experience were also living in the city. I believe it was a combination of ignorance and societal messages.

In college, again there were Black people in my life (a co-worker, a sorority sister, a classmate, etc.), but no one I was very close to. It would still be many years before I

would see a more accurate picture of Black life in America. I believed that everyone had the same opportunity to be as successful as they wanted to be through hard work and education. I now know of the myriad ways our country has strategically and purposefully blocked Black people from achieving any version of the American Dream, the belief that anyone regardless of race or class can achieve success if they work hard enough.

According to an Archbridge Institute (2023) survey of 2,187 respondents, 40% of white respondents felt they had achieved the American Dream compared with 18% of Black respondents who believed they had. As that dream gets further and further away for most Americans of all races, it remains furthest out of reach for Black Americans.

Unfortunately, the majority of white Americans think things are just fine: "More than half (59 percent) of White Americans believe that the United States has made the changes necessary to give Blacks equal rights with Whites" (Tatum, 2017, p. 363). I think the more difficult it becomes for whites to achieve the American Dream, the less we will be able to see that we have any kind of privilege. Even if it gets harder for white people to achieve their American dream, people of color will still have the blame placed on them for their own failures. And despite this, people of color will continue to be put at fault for their failures instead of having their own country see that it is at the fault of its own systems. This is especially true when the media portrays a handful of Black people achieving greater success than white people. This, then, creates anger and resentment toward those who are getting ahead, but these people are usually the exception to the rule. The media portrays far more Black people as villains, which also creates anger but worse than that, fear. The media, however, is just a distraction from the truth, and the truth is

somewhere between the extremes: there are successful Black people and also Black people who are criminals, but the majority of Black people are trying to make something of their lives in the world, just with fewer opportunities than white people, but white people would have to leave the Contact stage to see this.

Disintegration

The next stage, Disintegration, could result in the white person either avoiding more contact with Black people if they are able or having to change their beliefs. This stage did not happen for me until I became a teacher. Until then, I could choose whether or not to interact with Black people for the most part. I don't think it was a conscious decision, but I also wasn't actively seeking out friends who looked different than me and had different backgrounds than I did. As a teacher, cross-racial interaction was/is unavoidable for me. Since this is the case, I have developed new beliefs. This also forced me to seek out white people with similar beliefs to my new beliefs and to begin distancing myself from white people who were unlikely to change.

Because I have learned so much about the harm white people cause Black people, I have had to really analyze my interactions with my students. It is difficult for me to talk about the harm I have caused to students. One reason is that I'm just not aware of when I have done it. I think it would be incredibly difficult for students who felt spirit-murdered by me to confront me about what I said or did: "Many people of color have shared with me that they don't bother giving feedback to a white person if they think the individual is unwilling to accept it; they either endure the microaggressions or drift away from the relationship. They do not feel close to white people to whom they can't speak honestly

about racism, and these relationships always have a degree of distance and inauthenticity” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 116). They could be risking their grade and dignity, or even getting a discipline referral if I was the kind of teacher to react defensively. Another reason that it is difficult is because of the shame I feel for having harmed my students. I think it is difficult for any person to acknowledge harm to another, but especially when I was the adult who was trusted to provide equitable education for all of my students, and that was not always the case.

When I started teaching in 2002, I was hired at a high school in south St. Louis County, MO. The residents of that area at that time according to Census records were 94.9% white and 1.8% Black. My school, however, was 80.5% white and 16.36% Black because the district participated in the VICC program. I don't remember any specific incidents that I am aware of where I spirit-murdered students in my classes, but I do remember a huge learning curve when it came to my cheerleading squad. In my first year, I was hired to be the varsity cheerleading head coach. In my second year of teaching, my assistant cheerleading coach and I decided to split our team into two: one for football and basketball and one for soccer and wrestling. We had struggled that first year due to the athletic director giving me the job that my assistant coach had been “promised,” and she didn't handle it well. The decision to split the squad to her felt like a win because she felt she was getting the A squad as those girls had higher tryout scores and would be cheering for the more popular, well-attended sports, and I was taking the B squad, the girls whose scores were not quite as high during their tryouts. In my mind, I felt like this would give more girls an opportunity who normally wouldn't have a chance to cheer for a fall sport

or be a cheerleader at all because of the number of girls we could have on our squad. Having been the head coach for a year and having been a cheerleader myself in high school, I thought I was prepared for this new endeavor. I went from coaching eighteen girls who all lived in the district to ten girls: six white girls, one Asian girl who lived in the district, and three Black girls who lived in the city.

Something I looked forward to was continuing our tradition of pre-game dinners at the homes of the girls. This was a time for team bonding before games and a chance to get a good meal. As I mentioned before, I did not have any close Black friends, and my parents didn't want me at their houses if I did, so this was the first time that I had been invited to the home of a Black person. I remember nervously driving to the city to the home of one of the girls, nervous because I was unused to driving in the city and not knowing what to expect when I got there. She lived in a two-story townhouse-style home with her mom, dad, and sister. At the time, I was living in a two-story condo in the county. Our home layouts were remarkably similar. They were warm and welcoming to all of us. She and her mom had prepared spaghetti and salad for the girls and me. We ate, chatted, laughed, and got to know each other better. It was no different than if I had a group of friends over for dinner at my house. I felt comfortable the entire time and realized my nervousness was unnecessary. Years later, I would be invited to a graduation party for a Black student who had struggled hard to graduate and made it. I knew I would most likely be the only white person there, but I was so honored to be asked, I made sure to attend, and of course, I was welcomed with open arms.

One major aspect I didn't anticipate was the transportation needs of the girls who lived in the city. Coming from an all-white squad at my own high school and having one Black girl on my squad the previous year who lived in the district, I had never had to deal with the need for taxi cabs to transport the squad members to or from an event. Our school's procedure for afterschool practices was to have an activity bus to take students home, but for games or matches, it was my responsibility to order the cabs needed from the athletic office. These often had to be scheduled days or weeks in advance so making last-minute changes was often not an option or I would just plain forget. I can think of one Saturday wrestling meet where we had a bus from our school to the rival school, but I had forgotten to order cabs for the girls who lived in the city to get to our school. I'm not an organized person, but forgetting to request cabs is unforgivable. I can't think of a way to make a person feel more invisible than forgetting to include them in an event. While the girls who lived in the district were all able to get rides to the school to get on the bus to the tournament, the three girls who lived in the city were noticeably absent, and there was nothing I could do but apologize. They would be at home knowing that the other girls got to attend and they were missing out. It would be a missed opportunity for all-day team bonding and cheering on their wrestling team. If I were them, I would have been angry, sad, and disappointed: angry that my coach forgot and this would never happen to the white girls, sad that I didn't live close enough to catch a ride with a friend or have my own car, and disappointed that I was looking forward to an all-day tournament with my friends only to sit at home instead. In high school, being included is so important

developmentally. I can remember being excluded by my group of friends, but it would be even worse if an adult had done it.

Once I got the hang of ordering the cabs, I encountered another issue: requesting the cabs for pick up. Cabs could be notoriously unreliable when it came to pick-up times so I began to call them at halftime of the game for basketball or halfway through wrestling weight classes to ensure that the cab would be there by the end of the game. Unfortunately, several times this meant the girls who needed cabs would have to leave before the event had ended, missing out on the final outcome of who won. Waiting until the end of the game to call the cab could have meant waiting up to two hours for the cab to pick the girls up. During the wrestling season when meets sometimes didn't end until 10 p.m. or later, this could mean sitting in a dark, empty parking lot until midnight. The girls, too, would be getting up early (earlier than I was most likely) to catch buses for school the next day. I think I justified this to myself as I was doing it for their safety and well-being when I was really doing it for my convenience.

In retrospect, I'm sure that ordering cabs too early where the three Black cheerleaders would have to leave the game early, and forgetting to order them altogether made them feel less than a part of the team or at least not as important or included as the other members. When I think about those girls today, I can only think about how brave they were to try out for a team that is historically all white, knowing that they would have to be transported home, often alone, in a cab late at night, only to get up earlier than their white peers the next day and do it all over again. Upon reflection, as a parent today, I can't imagine the fear their parents must have had to have when thinking about their

teenage daughters riding home in cabs with mostly grown men who were strangers to them. Our education system itself was spirit-murdering their parents by forcing them to choose between a perceived quality education and additional, possibly unsafe travel, or a perceived mediocre education closer to home. Although their parents had chosen for them to leave their neighborhood schools in favor of the VICC program, these young women were choosing to be a part of a school community that was not welcoming and inclusive outside of football, basketball, and track (the three sports that Black students participated in at the time I was there).

At the time, I probably thought if their parents cared enough, they would come to the games and pick them up. Thinking about my own high school experience, my parents rarely came to my games, and I mostly drove myself. I think maybe I was trying to justify the situation by blaming the parents. I never considered why the district didn't provide buses home from these events. At least then, it would be a district employee driving the students instead of an unvetted cab driver. Perhaps, I thought this was the price they paid for choosing this program. If I'm honest, if my white team members had needed cabs, I most likely would have done the same thing as far as forgetting to call due to lack of experience and last-minute changes, and calling the cabs at halftime to prevent having to wait after the games were over, but the fact remains that the situation would not have happened to white kids. They would never have to be in that situation to begin with; ultimately, this was part of a system that was/is unfair to Black children. I spirit-murdered them by excluding them from parts of or whole events. This was spirit-murder through silencing and erasure because not including them restricted their

opportunities with and contributions to the team. I also spirit-murdered them by not questioning school policies about transportation that jeopardized the safety of the girls on the team. I not only silenced them, but I silenced myself as well.

Reintegration

The Reintegration stage happens when the person consciously acknowledges a white identity. I think this happened to me when I switched schools. After six years of teaching in my previous high school, I was hired into a district in the northwest part of St. Louis County. At the time, the demographics of the high school were 27.4% Black, 4.2% Hispanic, 3.5% Asian, and 64.5% white. I remember my first year there, I struggled with the schedule. My previous school had four 90-minute blocks per day, which allowed only three passing periods for all of the students. My new school employed a block schedule only on Wednesday and Thursday while having a seventh-period day on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday. On these days, I felt like everything was moving faster than I could process it. On these days we had six passing periods for all students, and my department also had a split lunch period. It was much harder to skip a block period in my previous school, and I felt like I generally knew where all of my students were. Another adjustment for me was going from a building where I knew everyone, the administrators, the counselors, the secretaries, teachers in other departments, etc., to knowing very few people. When a student would ask to go somewhere or would be called to an office, it was likely that I didn't know who they were seeing or where they were going. I didn't have relationships with these kids or any of the staff in the school like I was used to so I often felt like the students were trying to take advantage of my lack of knowledge by

asking me to go places so they could wander the halls. Because of this, I feel like I gave everyone, Black or white, male or female, the third degree when they asked for a pass to go anywhere. In short, I felt like I had lost control in a lot of ways, which led to frustration and irritability on my part.

Although I had been teaching for six years before changing schools, in my eighth year of teaching I still had assumptions and stereotypes based on ignorance and societal messages. My parents expected me to get exceptional grades and to go to college after high school. I assumed everyone's parents did the same. I also had two college-educated and employed parents in my house growing up as did many of my (white) friends, which I now know is not the case for everyone. In my schooling experience, I had classes with Black students, but as tracking into higher classes began in middle and high school, I had fewer classes with Black students. The few Black students I did have classes with were high-achieving, highly involved students like myself. In my mind, the reason there weren't more Black students in these classes was either because they didn't want to work hard or because they weren't smart enough to qualify for the classes. I'm not sure if everyone thought this because it was not something white people talked about openly in my experience. I think white people, in general, believe in meritocracy: that people are rewarded based on hard work, skills, or talents, rather than their wealth or social status.

When I started teaching English, my beliefs continued that Black students weren't doing their work because they didn't want to or weren't smart enough to do it. I had not experienced or had not been taught the variety of other factors that might have impacted their educational or personal lives in the years before starting high school, such as a lack

of generational wealth in their families. This can lead to low socioeconomic status which can include poorer nutrition, lower parental education levels, and poorer housing conditions. However, the difficulty in “understanding racism as a system of advantage that structurally benefits whites and disadvantages people of color on the basis of group membership [is that it] threatens not only beliefs about society but also beliefs about one’s own life accomplishments” (Tatum, 2017, p. 328). If white people are already given a head start, did this mean I hadn’t worked hard for everything I felt I had earned? Does it make my accomplishments less valid? In my heart, I don’t think I deserve my college degree or career any less, for example, but I do acknowledge that my road to get there was significantly easier. By accepting that I have white privilege, I accept that my life will still have its challenges, but the color of my skin will not add to those challenges.

In my first year at my new school, I had a Black, male student named Jared in my English 1 class. Jared had a twin brother, and the two of them were often in the hallway during class time laughing, yelling, and in general, just avoiding going to class. While in class, he did little work, varying between trying to make people laugh or sleeping but avoiding doing the work nonetheless. Both Jared and his brother had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and struggled academically with turning in work and passing classes. Ds and Fs were the norm for Jared and his brother. This often resulted in them acting out and getting suspended. After what seemed like his fourth or fifth suspension, I asked my supervising principal, a white female who was also Jared’s disciplinary principal, “Why is he still here?” Not only did I ask her this, but I asked very casually in the hallway in front of other people. I was still in the mindset that everyone should want

to be high-achieving academically with the ultimate goal of going to college, and their failure to do these things was a sign of a lack of motivation or desire. At that time, teachers in my building commonly used language like this so it was reinforced to me by my community that it was okay to think this way and say things like this. It was also very common for struggling students like Jared to end up going to our alternative school or some kind of alternative program for credit recovery. The general sentiment behind my question was “It’s obvious to me as a teacher that he does not care about learning. He is only here to cause trouble, so why don’t we get rid of him?” In other words, if he’s not going to contribute, he shouldn’t be here.

My principal patiently explained to me, “We are a public school, and it is our job to educate everyone who comes through those doors.” At that moment, I felt shame and embarrassment. This woman was someone I admired and respected, and she looked at me with disappointment and I dare say disgust. I felt I had been scolded and rightly so. I changed the way my supervising principal saw me after making that comment, which was hurtful to me because she was someone I respected and admired. If she hadn’t “caught” me, I probably would have continued thinking this way, so as embarrassing as it was, I’m grateful that she was able to open my eyes to my flawed behavior and thinking. That moment held up a mirror for me to see how I looked and sounded. I had not only let her down as a teacher who is supposed to be supporting all students, but I had also let Jared and myself down. What if Jared had been walking by and heard me? I would be one more adult in his life that had given up on him. By having this mindset, there was no way I was providing him with the best possible education and support. Whether consciously or

subconsciously, I was not checking in with him about academics or personal life. I wasn't encouraging him to do his classwork or stay engaged. I had convinced myself that it wasn't worth my time because he didn't care anyway. I mostly ignored him unless he was being disruptive and then engaged with him in negative ways like verbal warnings, removal from the classroom, or disciplinary referrals to his principal. If our interactions were limited to me ignoring or punishing him, there is no doubt I was murdering his spirit every time he was in my classroom.

My problem was that I wasn't allowing myself to really see him. I did not know this student's background or circumstances that led to his attitude toward being at school. I also did not sympathize with how hard it must have been for him to be in a class where he truly did not understand the material and constantly felt like a failure as a result. I could only look at it from my own point of view: I was a strong student, school came easily to me, and I had supportive, educated parents who were both teachers and valued education. Despite more than six years of teaching experience, I was still expecting all students to be just like me. This is because Whiteness made me believe that what was normal in my white community was normal for everyone, and if someone strayed from that norm, they were the one who was wrong. I didn't see that there were other paths to success. I had to ask myself what my purpose was in being a teacher. Was it to get every student into college? Was it to get every student to pass every class? Realistically, these things were impossible, and I knew that in my heart, that was not my purpose. My purpose was to guide each student on their journey towards adulthood, whatever that looked like. I was meant to be a stable and caring adult in their lives who would help

them find success and be a person they could trust and rely on for as long as they were at our school. Had my principal not gently reminded me what my true purpose was, I probably would have continued this fatalistic type of thinking.

During Jared's time in high school, I developed a good relationship with him and was able to learn about his family and background. As an English teacher, I have more opportunity to discover aspects of a student's personal life and past than say, a math teacher, whether it's through writing assignments or book discussions. I began to ask Jared questions about his life to put into his writing and also to get to know him. It turned out he liked talking about his life, but he didn't love writing or reading. This was due to his learning disability leading him to struggle in these areas and then acting out to avoid doing them. What I learned from him was that his mother was nineteen when she had the twins. His father had passed away at some point, and his mother was in jail, for what I never knew. His grandmother had custody of the boys, and they were living in a hotel. At some point in middle school, Jared had been hit in the leg by a stray bullet and walked with a bit of a limp. He had been expelled from a middle school in another district for fighting, which forced his grandmother to relocate to a district that he and his brother could attend. After learning all of this information about Jared, I wondered how he was able to get up each day and go to school at all. It gave me much more insight into his behavior at school and his attitude toward academics and life in general. He didn't have much more to lose.

Knowing all of this about Jared made me feel empathy for what he had been through and understanding for why he behaved the way he did. It made me want to be

more patient with him and actually try to make a connection with him so he could be successful. I wanted to show up for him in a way that other adults had not. In addition to taking time to learn about his life, I also didn't automatically write discipline referrals when he was tardy or skipped class. This is against school policy, but it also prevents detentions and suspensions. When a kid doesn't have transportation home from detention, they are likely to skip it. When a kid skips detention enough times, they will get in-school suspension (ISS). ISS usually lasts for three to five days. Even though the kid is in the building and will have full access to all the work, it is unlikely it will get done without teacher assistance. Out-of-school suspension is even worse. Typically, students who get more than five days of suspension are not able to recover their grades to pass for the semester because of so much lost instruction and support. When Jared would come in late, I would often overlook it and instead pull him aside for a conversation about how he was missing the most important parts of the instruction. One time, when he was skipping class multiple days in a row to go to lunch instead, I went to his successful transitions class to talk about what was going on. He said his cousin had been killed, and he wasn't dealing well with it. I told him that I was sorry he had experienced this, and he was able to sit in my hallway to work quietly or visit a counselor, but for his safety, I needed to know where he was. I told him skipping classes typically resulted in a discipline referral, but I had chosen not to do that yet because I knew something must be going on to cause this departure from the recent progress I had seen. Having him miss more class time was not going to teach him any lessons at that point. I felt like Jared needed

relationship-building rather than more discipline, so I chose to go against procedure in that case, and many since then.

Towards the end of his sophomore year, I was walking back to my classroom from the library at the end of the day when I came across a fight in the lobby. It was Jared and another boy posturing to square off, but not hitting each other yet. There was a crowd of kids surrounding them, watching, yelling, and recording on their phones. I ran between them and yelled for someone to get a principal or an officer. I put my arms out toward each of them and told them to stop or they would be suspended. I locked eyes with Jared, hoping he would see me and realize what he was doing wasn't worth a suspension. Instead, he put his arm out to gently guide me out of the way and shook his head, as if to say, "There is nothing you can do to stop me." Perhaps the need to save face was more important than another suspension. I moved out of the way to let them fight until finally a principal and a police officer arrived to break them up. I was then asked by the principal to write a statement about what happened.

Since I came upon the situation after it had already begun, the administration must have pulled the video camera footage in the lobby to figure out who started it. Because of this, Jared was seen putting his arm out to move me out of the way and accused of "assaulting a teacher." I received a form in my mailbox asking me if I wanted to press charges against him. This was probably the first time I realized my power as a teacher and as a white person. In my mind, Jared was protecting me from getting hurt in the fight, not assaulting me, but in my hand was the ability to make him a criminal. This kid who already had so many obstacles in his young life was not only facing a possible 180-day

suspension for a second offense of fighting but possible expulsion and jail time. I threw the form away, but I wondered how many teachers would have filled out that form. Jared was expelled even without the form because the video was enough: he had put his hands on a teacher. I was devastated at his expulsion because I had seen him make real progress and was hopeful he would make it to graduation. I also felt guilt because if I had not stepped in, he would not have had to guide me out of the way, and he would have just ended up with an out-of-school suspension instead. According to the ACLU, “Students suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation are nearly 3 times more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year,” and that is exactly what happened to Jared.

A year later I was contacted by a lawyer asking if I wanted to be a character witness. Jared was in trouble again, and the lawyer wanted me to testify that I knew he was violent based on “what he did to me.” I ignored the email because at the time I assumed that the lawyer already had his mind made up about Jared, but I was again reminded of the power I held as a white teacher, that I would automatically be believed over Jared, a teenaged Black male. I could make his life worse than it already was by telling a story that had been twisted into something it wasn’t. What would have been more powerful was if I had called the lawyer and defended Jared’s character. What if I had told them about Jared’s sense of humor and friendliness? What if I had told them about some of his past struggles and his overcoming them? Would my information have mitigated whatever consequences he faced? Could I have been a spirit-restorer instead of a spirit-murderer? My inaction was spirit-murder as well. White silence is a power move

that whites use to refrain from being questioned or challenged. By saying nothing, I was essentially validating the lawyer's accusation by not interrupting it. I should have supported Jared when no one else would. Learning the power there was in my white identity, I should have used it to validate Jared in a good way and not just let him be labeled as the criminal the school and the lawyer wanted to make him.

Pseudo-Independent

The first stage of redefining a positive white identity is Pseudo-Independent. The person begins to question the proposition that Blacks are innately inferior to whites for racism and to see how he or she wittingly or unwittingly perpetuates racism. Again, I believe switching jobs and teaching at my current school had a lot to do with my moving into this stage. I went from a school where, looking back through the yearbooks from my time there, Black kids participated in only four sports (football, basketball, wrestling, and track) to a school where Black kids participated in EVERYTHING: band, swim team, tennis, golf, theater, you name it! It was like a utopia where anything was possible! Black kids were openly passionate about anime, chess, country music, and reading. They lived in the district, rode the bus, or drove their own cars. They lived with just mom, just dad, both, or neither. They were Christian, Muslim, or no religion. JUST LIKE EVERY OTHER KID: white, Hispanic, Asian, or Black. I had never considered all of these options. It made me reconsider all of my previous stereotypes about Black kids. Basically, it made me more reflective of my assumptions about anyone. The diversity of interests made me consider why I assumed a kid plays a certain sport or listens to a certain type of music. So many of my students did not follow my previously-held

assumptions that I began to be more open-minded about them. This was probably the best thing to happen to me as far as a break from my previously held beliefs about Black people. I remember at my twenty-year reunion in 2018, I felt much more comfortable around the Black women from my high school class than the white women. I'm sure they didn't feel the same about me, but I found myself gravitating towards them. I think as a student myself, I was often afraid of the Black students because, combined with social messaging I had received my whole life from the media and my community, they mostly socialized with other Black kids, and throughout my K-12 experience, I had witnessed them get in trouble more often than white students. However, after spending so much time around so many different kinds of students, I developed some great relationships with the Black students in my classes over the years, and I often found them to be more genuine and less judgmental than my white students. This translated to me feeling more comfortable around Black people outside of school, whether it was a Black coworker or a Black neighbor. At my reunion, I found myself wanting to know these women and learn about their experiences since I had never given them a chance before. I knew we probably still had our differences, but they seemed so much less, and what I wanted to find now was our similarities.

Because racial identity development is a lifelong journey, I continue to make mistakes. As recently as the fall of 2021, I committed spirit-murder. As anyone who has taught before, during, and after COVID-19, our students have changed in their behaviors and attitudes. Our students went fully virtual for the first two months of 2020, and then about two-thirds came back two days a week in person while the rest stayed completely

virtual. The fall of 2021 was our first semester back full-time in person. I was excited and nervous since I hated teaching virtually and not being able to make genuine connections with my students, but I still worried about how COVID-19 would affect people and also how much learning had been lost from that year.

Our most recent demographics (2022) show our school as 34.2% Black, 12.6% Hispanic 8.2% Multiracial, and 41.4% white, far more diverse than even when I started sixteen years ago. While I have learned so much since then, considering what I say and how I say it is something I still struggle with. Returning to school after COVID-19 was difficult. My students struggled with completing and submitting assignments and coming to school altogether. I stopped taking off points when students submitted late work because I was honestly just happy they were turning anything in. I called it “the Covid hangover,” but it was probably a combination of depression, anxiety, and lack of focus, all due to trauma experienced while being isolated.

One day I received an email from a student I will call Daja. She had at least thirteen absences from my class and had most recently missed a group presentation. She did not contact me or her group to report that she would not be there for the presentation. When she did email me three days later, she mentioned being sick and asked if she could make up the presentation. I was frustrated, and it came out in my response to her. In addition to berating her for missing the presentation and not letting anyone know, I also criticized her for missing two class discussions and not making them up. What I finished with, though, was by far the worst thing I said: “If you are planning to do a two- or four-year college next year, I will say at this point you are far from ready. There is no

moving of due dates in a college class unless the professor decides. I know this is still high school, but as far as preparing you, I'm really not doing that by moving things around and allowing you to turn everything in late. I know life is stressful, but it always is and it is not going to get better in college. You are going to have to figure out how to balance your workload and manage your time.” I felt I had certainly made my point.

The next day I got an email from Daja’s mother requesting a call so we could discuss my email. I immediately knew I had overdone it, to say the least. When I initially saw the email, I was afraid of how she might react. She had every right to be angry and hurt on behalf of her daughter. However, it was the opposite. She seemed to choose her words carefully in order to appease me. She stated, “Hello Mrs. Guilfoyle, My name is Candace (Daja's mother). Is there a time you're available to zoom or speak over the phone in reference to Daja and her grades? I am concerned about some things and would love if we could talk. The last email that was sent to her was very concerning to me and I know you can't always understand tone in an email or text but I would really appreciate if we could discuss this further. Please understand I'm not upset, just concerned about her. I thank you for your time in advance and look forward to hearing from you. Respectfully, Candace.” I could tell by her words that she was being too kind because my tone was unquestionable. It felt like she was being overly nice to diffuse my anger and frustration when she, no doubt, felt it herself, even assuring me that she was “not upset.” Later in our phone conversation, she explained that she was also a teacher, and she understood where I was coming from. I went from feeling like I was talking to an upset parent to talking to an intellectual and professional peer and I no longer had the upper hand.

She told me that Daja had been struggling with severe anxiety all year and was too afraid to tell her teachers. It was why she had missed so many days. I felt my stomach sink. I thought I could not feel worse until she said the next part: Daja had interpreted my saying that she was not college ready as me saying that she was not college material and should not go. Daja had been told that by various teachers throughout her educational journey, and here I was reinforcing it. I don't think I could have felt worse. I knew I had to mend things with her as soon as possible.

With tears in my eyes and my hands shaking, I went to her third-hour class and asked her teacher if I could speak to her. She came out looking understandably nervous. We sat in two chairs facing each other, and I told her through tears how sorry I was for what I had said and how I had said it. I told her that I, too, struggled with anxiety and depression, and I understood how it could take over one's life. I told her that I absolutely thought she should go to college if and when she was ready, and that I would help her get there. I did not discuss the racial component of the situation because at the time, I did not consciously think that I had said what I said because of her race, although now I can see that it factored in my subconscious bias. Perhaps I would not have been as harsh had she been white. After all, I was seeing similar behaviors in other senior students, and I had not spoken to anyone else that harshly. We hugged, and she went back into her class. I'm sure she lost trust after I sent that email, but I hope she knew that I did regret it. Although it was not my intention for her to believe that she should never go to college, I hurt her nonetheless, and I can't take it back.

Since that happened, I have learned that historically, white women have used crying as a manipulation to put the hurt back on the person of color, to control Black people, and in some cases, to cause the deaths of Black people. DiAngelo (2018) states:

Whether intended or not, when a white woman cries over some aspect of racism, all the attention immediately goes to her, demanding time, energy, and attention from everyone in the room when they should be focused on ameliorating racism. While she is given attention, the people of color are yet again abandoned and/or blamed. (pp. 42-43)

Looking back, although my tears were genuine, Daja could have interpreted them as forced or even fake. Not only that, but my apology may have caused her more stress and anxiety because she felt she had to comfort and forgive me. I wish I had known that at the time. I would have handled the situation differently by giving myself more time to control my emotional response and making sure I didn't cry. The last thing I would want to do is put the responsibility for my actions back on the student when I had caused the problem in the first place.

Immersion/Emersion

The Immersion/Emersion stage requires that the person replace white and Black myths and stereotypes with accurate information about what it means and has meant to be white in the US as well as in the world in general. I think this has happened slowly over my sixteen years in my current district. I am no longer surprised when Black kids want to be engineers, filmmakers, marine biologists, or any other career they dream about pursuing. I also don't hesitate to encourage them. I have seen so many kids become the

very things they dreamed about. I find myself recommending more Black kids to take honors or college credit English, creative writing, and science fiction. I don't believe this is because I have more Black students either. It's because I'm at a school that supports all kids in whatever they want to pursue. I also find myself trying not to write referrals for Black or white students unless I absolutely have to. I don't think the culture of my previous district emphasized social justice or equity. Perhaps if our VICC student percentage had been 35% instead of 20%, the district would have placed more of an emphasis on these things. In addition to having these elements emphasized in my new district, I was also exposed to many more stories of students' negative experiences in education, and I realized that I did not want to be a contributor to those experiences any longer. I didn't write that many referrals previously, but I began to see that offenses like "insubordination" and "disrespect" are subjective and that suspensions, either in-school or out-of-school, resulted in lost instructional time and multiple missing assignments, causing students to fall behind and sometimes never recover.

I don't know if this change would have happened if I had stayed at my previous school, but I'd like to think my natural interest and compassion for other people's stories combined with my true desire to help all students achieve success and ultimately witnessing the murder of George Floyd would have led me to the same destination but at a much slower rate. From a young age, I was an avid reader because I was drawn to stories of characters with difficult journeys and how they were able to persevere against the odds. My freshman year of high school, I was deeply affected by the autobiography of Ryan White, a young boy with hemophilia who contracted HIV from a blood transfusion

and died at the age of eighteen. In my junior year, I was again impacted by the stories of Mahatma Gandhi and Malcolm X, two figures searching for freedom from oppression in very different ways. I went into education because I felt like I didn't have anyone supporting me during my difficult high school years, and I hoped to be that person for young adults. I even started my master's in counseling until I realized that I was truly passionate about teaching and was doing a fair amount of counseling in my classroom already. In addition to the daily teen drama about relationships with peers and family, I also had students from Bosnia who had fled a war, often witnessing horrific violence and then living as refugees elsewhere in Europe before escaping the U.S. These stories taught me early on that I have so much more to learn. After twenty-two years, I have never tired of hearing their stories, and each one has helped me to become a more compassionate and empathetic human.

Autonomy

The final stage, Autonomy, is internalizing, nurturing, and applying the new definition of Whiteness evolved in the earlier stages; the person no longer feels a need to oppress, idealize, or denigrate people on the basis of group membership characteristics. I actively seek opportunities to learn from other cultural groups, and I am still working towards "actively becoming increasingly aware of how other forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, ageism) are related to racism and acting to eliminate them" (Helms, 1990, p.66). I want to remain consistently open to new information and new ways of thinking about racial and cultural variables. Evolving to feeling 100 percent positive about my white

identity is still in progress as I know I'll still make many mistakes and never stop learning. But, I have come a long way and will never go back.

That is the reality of spirit-murder, though. Whether intentional or unintentional, all that matters is the effect. These are just a few examples of spirit-murder that I know I have caused, but what concerns me are the ones I don't even know about, the ones I can't apologize for. Whether the pain I have caused was intentional or not, the effect was the same, and I have still caused it and I am a part of the larger group who has caused it. Because of this, it is difficult for me to "feel good" about being white. I would like to think I am doing my best to abandon my individual racism and become oppositional to institutional and cultural racism. I don't know if this is even totally possible, but I do know that I'm wholly committed to it.

Chapter 7: Reality is Wrong

Chapter Introduction:

My name is Brian Guilfoyle, and these are several examples of how I engaged in spirit-murder. I am a white male educator in a suburban St. Louis County high school. In this chapter, I begin by sharing three stories about middle and high-school-aged students I spirit-murdered. This realization was hard to process and took months to understand. The white structures I was a part of in my school district did harm to Black students that can never be resolved. I want to tell my stories of how I unknowingly (at the time) harmed my students in an effort to stop future incidents of spirit-murder from occurring. This is a very honest and eye-opening reflection that leaves me feeling vulnerable and with tremendous regret.

As an art major in college, I was exposed to information that was not taught to me in high school because of the limited curriculum that was available. My high school course offerings were restricted because of school finances and white Christian structures. These restrictions were placed by a school board comprised of white males whose choices were informed by colonialism. I attended a public high school in a small rural town in northeast Missouri and moved to St. Louis, Missouri, to attend a private university. One of my art history classes was “Eastern Art.” The course text was only 400 pages long and was supposed to cover the entire art history of China, Asia, India, and Japan (over 13,000 years). I also had two courses in Western Art, which covered Prehistoric to Renaissance and then Renaissance to Modern Art. The only African art that was mentioned and discussed was Egyptian Art. The professors did not even use the

words African Art when discussing Egypt. It wasn't until the modern art class that Black people were talked about as influential artists. Even then, it was brief, including only an overview of artists Faith Ringgold, Jacob Lawrence, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Gordon Parks. How could the history of African American art be wrapped up in four people? Unfortunately, I did not interrogate the lack of African American artists until a few years later when I taught Advanced Placement Art History at a public high school. I wish I would have explored Black history more in-depth in my undergraduate experience. The professors did not emphasize the importance of Black art history, but this is an easy excuse. I identify as a white male and was drawn to artists who were also white European males. As a result, I felt like my knowledge of Black art history was lacking when I became a teacher, and negatively impacted the way I taught all my students. I became a teacher, which, in turn, offered a limited curriculum to my students.

My Practices As A Rookie Art Teacher

In my senior year of college (2000), I started my student teaching at an upper-middle-class public school district in suburban St. Louis. Few students of color lived in the area at the time. The district participated in the desegregation school program, which is now called Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation. Students of color were bused from St. Louis City to St. Louis County for different opportunities and in the name of better education. The result of taking the brightest students in the city and transplanting them to the county left a shrinking public school district that was in disrepair and eventually lost accreditation. The concept and implementation of the desegregation program in St. Louis provided educational opportunities for children who

lived in the city by busing them to the high-performing schools in the county. This system was both beneficial and harmful to generations of African American students. I was part of this system as an educator and coach. I did not think to question this system as a young teacher because I came from a diverse school system during my high school experience. I had little to no knowledge of the racist school systems in St. Louis. My lack of knowledge prompted me to stay reserved and observe the white systems in place without questioning their impacts on students of color. At the time, the prevailing thought among my peers and I was that desegregation students had behavioral problems and their performance in class was based on a bad home environment. I am now aware this is false. I could see the same problems with students who had “intact” homes as well as students who lived in the county. White colonial structures in the school that did not support these children were to blame. The educators (including me) who had preconceived notions of failure and biased thoughts were to blame. After getting to know some of the Black students on a personal level, I became very uncomfortable with the way these children were treated and being educated at this school. This prompted me to change as a teacher and think more about the individual students instead of lumping them together in groups.

Author Ain Grooms discusses the breakdown of the desegregation program in St. Louis. Grooms (2016) highlights the detriments of this program, arguing that:

Some leaders in the Black community in St. Louis describe the program as a brain drain, claiming that county schools would skim the best and brightest city school children, further undermining the city school system. The city’s first Black mayor, Freeman Bosley Jr., also opposed the busing program because “the money spent

on desegregation, which has now cost more than \$1.5 billion, should have been spent to improve city schools, and by extension, shore up crumbling neighborhoods.” The “brain drain” and funding arguments suggest that promising students should stay in the city schools supported by appropriate levels of funding, rather than leaving the city school system.

Research suggests this, yet the Missouri State Government was sending a message to its citizens that the current city schools of St. Louis, which had a majority of Black students and teachers, were failing, and the only way to change the education system was through sending students to white county schools. I remember when I started student teaching, a common thought process was that it was our job as educated county teachers to “save” minority students from the city schools. The colleges, county schools, and media preached this message. Almost every educator conveyed this philosophy to me, and I bought into it fully. This made me feel good that I was helping “less fortunate” students. Not only was I teaching students, but I was helping those who were struggling because they did not have the resources in their own community. I felt like I was going to make a difference in the lives of the Black students I taught. Little did I know that the Black students did not need saving; The entire education system needed reconstruction and had to be changed from the racist white colonial structures at its foundation. Some of these systems were built into the curriculum, like tracking, while others punished students unfairly like In School Suspension.

The way I viewed and interacted with the Black students was harmful to their identity and self-worth. I taught Black students that white policies were needed to

succeed in life. I did not realize it at the time, but I was murdering the spirits of Black students with white lies, white ideology, and my white privilege. Reflecting on this crushed me because this is not who I am anymore. At that point in time, it felt right, honest, and true. I believe I did this because this was the only way I could see Black children succeeding in school and in life. I just went along with others' thinking as this was a part of who I always was growing up. I was a very compliant child and did what was asked. I did not question adults or society around me, partially because I was protected by these white structures. As a white male, I had the privilege of not recognizing or acknowledging the racism that is ingrained in our communities. I could live life oblivious to the struggles of other humans based on their skin color. I could chalk it up to a Black person's bad home life, lack of work ethic, or blind luck. As I grapple with these thoughts today, I feel guilt about the way I viewed the world and treated others. I now know that racist structures are all around us in every community. These structures need to be changed. As I delve into, explore, and reflect on my actions as a white male educator, it is not my intention for these stories to be cathartic and therapeutic for me. I want to tell my story as another well-intentioned white educator causing undeniable damage to Black students' psyches and souls.

I remember receiving a call from an affluent West County school district at the end of my student teaching experience, asking me if I wanted a full-time position as an art teacher. I was so excited to get an offer from one of the highest-ranked school districts in the state based on the National Standards of test scores and ranking systems like *Niche*. My job would be vastly different from my student teaching experience. A week before I

started my position, the district split my assignment between the middle and high schools in the less affluent part of the district. My class sizes were over thirty kids, and some students were placed in the classes by their counselors instead of choosing to be in my elective courses. Student choice was not an option in some elective classes. The foreign language classes and choir were mainly composed of white county students, while art and theatre classes were largely comprised of Black city students. I was a first-year white male teacher who knew nothing of the struggles my students went through daily.

Tracking of students was alive and well in the school system. Black students took introductory courses, while white students took higher-level advanced placement courses. The decision on who was placed in what courses lay in the hands of the teachers, counselors, and administrators. Placements were supposedly given because of prior scores or grades in courses, but most of the time, it was purely subjective opinion.

In School Suspension- “Frequent Flyer”

It was 6:30 am as the warning bell rang for students to get to class. Middle school kids pushed through crowds and made their way down the packed halls. This middle school had a unique shape. The kids called it the *Starship Enterprise* because of the round part that contained classrooms and the long hallways going to the lunchroom that made it look like the spaceship from *Star Trek* on the school map. Just a few feet away from the lunchroom was the In-School Suspension (ISS) room. The room was about ten feet wide and twenty feet long, with bad fluorescent lighting and no windows or computers. There were fifteen desks, all facing the perimeter of the wall so students could not see each other. The walls were painted in a terrible dark red color, and the carpet was brown, old,

and stained from milk and food. This space looked more like a prison than a classroom for learning.

This was my room for the first hour of the day. Each specialist teacher was assigned one hour of ISS duty, which we all complained about daily. Students were sent there for a variety of reasons like excessive tardies, insubordination, skipping class, or fighting with their peers. My job was to take attendance, get everyone seated, and have them take out their work for the day. It was supposed to be a quiet space for kids to work without distracting others. It took about a month before I started realizing some major problems with the structure of ISS. The data is undeniable. Black students were and are disproportionately suspended in this suburban school district. The classroom held around fifteen students and was always filled; most of the time, the students were Black males. A majority of the students were assigned to ISS repeatedly. Once the first hour started, I contacted each teacher on their schedule and asked for missing work for the day. Very few students received work in the morning because the teachers did not respond. If a teacher did send work, it was in the afternoon when school was almost out. I believe this was for one of two reasons. One reason could be that the teacher forgot and was not doing their job as an educator. The second could be they did not want to send work because it required more effort and time from them.

As the year went on, I got to know one Black student in particular because he attended ISS at least once every two weeks. Gerald was referred to by the white teachers as a “frequent flyer.” He was a tall, skinny seventh grader who came with a bad reputation. White teachers talked about how Gerald would talk back and simply walk out

of the room when he was not engaged in a lesson. I noticed Gerald was not getting work from any of his teachers. Would they have done the same thing if it was a white student? It seemed as if the classroom teachers and administrators did not care about the missing work as long as that child was being punished and not in the classroom or hallways causing disruptions. As a result of ISS, Gerald and other Black students missed dozens of instructional hours while sitting in a room without social interaction and no work being completed, causing them to fall even further behind. These kids were an afterthought, and I was part of this discrimination. The system was failing these Black students. Along with hope, Black students lost engagement due to being so far behind their classmates, and this caused them to continue the misbehavior that got them removed. I felt this was what happened to Gerald. It is a vicious cycle where the student becomes disenchanted with education and loses trust in the adults in the system. What does a child do when they are bored and not engaged? The students would be deemed as misbehaving again and sent back to ISS. Eventually, the consequence would become an out-of-school suspension (OSS). How is a student supposed to pass a class if they never attend the class or don't have adults who care enough to develop personal and caring connections? I did not understand the severity of this situation back then. I was a rookie educator. I thought the students in ISS were bad students that needed to be reformed. I thought this system was horrible but beneficial. I initially believed it was helpful in holding students accountable and changing behaviors. Once I was part of the system for a couple of weeks, my perspectives changed. The vicious cycle that I saw happening to Gerald and other Black male students made me question the district's educational philosophy. It made me

question the idea of white teachers being the saviors of Black children. I wanted this structure to change, but I did nothing to stop it. As a new teacher, I was afraid to voice my opinion and lose my job. It hurt my heart to see these children suffer and made me lose hope in humanity.

As the ISS teacher, I skirted the blame off to the kids and the teachers in the classroom. I did not engage with the kids. I was supposed to ensure they worked quietly without interaction, which is precisely what I did as the teacher. In my mind, this wasn't my problem because I was doing what was being asked by the administration. I did not understand the impact of my inaction. I did not take an active role in standing up for Gerald and the other students. I could have emailed the teachers more regularly or walked to their rooms during my plan time to get work. I should have advocated for these Black students. Instead, I ignored Gerald and let him struggle. This is not a story with a happy ending because I do not know what happened to Gerald, and my realization of spirit-murder took place twenty years after it occurred.

As educators, we have to understand the role we play in the future lives of our students. What we do today can impact them both positively and negatively in the future. I have a hard time thinking about my role in Gerald's educational experience and know that my inaction and participation in the system of ISS caused him harm. I can only hope that he did not fall victim to the school-to-prison pipeline. The truth is that I spirit-murdered Gerald, and now he may be living with this trauma, which could have negatively impacted his life.

As a teacher in this racist school system, I started to buy into stereotypes. These stereotypical thoughts formed microaggressive actions. I assumed that all Black students were from the city and that they came from poverty and had families that were fractured, causing them to have “issues” at school. There are so many things wrong with these racist thoughts. First, I didn’t take into account that the school district started to have an increased number of minority students who lived in the county. According to Ain Grooms (2016), “Over 21,000 students attended the school district where I worked, and in 1982, the percentage of Black students was less than two percent, and by 1999, the percentage rose to seventeen. The increase was due to the mandated VICC program, which bused Black city students to the county schools.” According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in Missouri, in 2022, Black students made up seventeen percent of the district’s population, but enrollment in VICC has dropped to less than three percent. Black families have moved into the district at a substantial rate. Looking at this data, it is a racist thought process to think all Black students come from the same place and background.

Secondly, I had no clue about my students’ families, white or Black, so I had no right to assume anything. I did not make the same assumptions about my white students, even if they did end up in ISS. Growing up with and around white people allowed me to know they came from all different types of families and socio-economic groups. It was easy to make negative assumptions about Black students who I did not know. These were racist thoughts. I believe these thoughts were formed through discussions with other white educators and being naive to these racist ideals. I had no intention of having these

microaggressive thoughts and behaviors, yet there I was. I should have taken time to get to know my students individually instead of lumping people together as groups. Grouping students together creates bias and can have negative ideals of how a student will perform based on preconceived notions of a group. Third, why would their family life have anything to do with their academic capabilities? As a teacher, I have the goal of success for each student in my classroom. I was clearly spirit-murdering the Black students in my classes with my preconceived notions of who they were without ever getting to know them individually. Success looks different for each child, and I believe that true success is shown through the community developed in that class, building, and district, not the test scores and accolades from the government.

How Adam Changed My Life

This is a story of my teaching while using white structures for Black students. I had a student named Adam in my second through fifth years of teaching art at the middle and high school levels. This student was a Black male who was also part of the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Program. I remember having him in art class, and he immediately showed exceptional talent as an artist. Adam could look at something and replicate it on paper with accurate realism. He joined the art club after school, and I gave him supplies to take home to keep on creating art. I felt like this was a path towards success in school and in life for Adam. He was very creative and used art as an outlet for his personal life. I remember one drawing he brought in from home was a portrait of a family member. Years later, I found out that it was a drawing of his brother, who passed away in a car accident caused by a drive-by shooting. The drawing was beautiful, and Adam showed so

much emotion and passion through the subject matter and detail. His work was some of the best in the school that year, and it was highlighted at our all-district art show.

As the year progressed, Adam struggled in his other classes and school in general. He started to get detentions from his white teachers. He was showing up late to class and “talked back” when asked where he was going. Adam would skip some of his classes, and I could see his future was in jeopardy. One day, I pulled Adam aside and had a conversation with him. I think my motivation was wanting to help a Black child and be a white savior. I told him that he needed to learn to “play the game” to succeed. We talked about how there are rules and structures in school that are different from home and other spaces. I told him he needed to change his behaviors depending on where he was during the day. What I didn’t realize was that I was spirit-murdering Adam. I was basically telling him to surrender to the white structures at school, to change who he was, and to have a fake personality. I should not have told Adam, “Learn to play the game.” I should have created other conversations with administrators and teachers on how “the game needs to be changed.” This was a cover for teaching that white school structures are the only way to learn when we need to change these structures for our Black students who would thrive in a different setting that would celebrate them. Did this hurt Adam's confidence and impact his self-identity? Adam ended up being a success story in high school, but I tend to think he could have had an even better experience if I knew how to better advocate for him back then. Fortunately, Adam was determined and attended an Ivy League school in college and graduate school. He now works as a highly renowned artist and has shown work at respected art galleries like *The Tate* in London and *The*

Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I have been fortunate to keep in contact with Adam, and I apologized for that conversation years ago. I should have stood up for Black students and fought the racist school systems in place. Currently, Adam's artwork celebrates Black culture and discusses his personal life in a highly creative manner. He understood why I had that conversation about "playing the game" but also felt that this topic must be addressed in schools. Courageous conversations need to take place to enact change from white systems that harm Black children. As an educator, I need to learn how to serve all my students better, and I feel that Adam has taught me far more lessons than I ever taught him. Adam opened my eyes to my biases that were harmful even though it may have been well-intentioned. Spirit-murder is not only committed by those who are aware of the action but also by those who are unaware and sometimes think they are doing the right thing. Even though I had good intentions, I still committed spirit-murder.

I was an art teacher, and I thought my job was to teach students how to make quality artwork that could be displayed at an art show. Now, I recognize this form of teaching mainly benefited my white students. My job evaluation was not based on my work as an art teacher. My evaluation was based on the effectiveness of my classroom management skills in my art classroom. If I didn't have any behavioral issues in my classroom, I was deemed by the administration to be doing a terrific job with my students. Linking passive behavior with success is absolutely a false concept. As a new teacher, I struggled to make connections with Black students and did not adjust the curriculum to meet their needs. I believe this struggle was because there was a lack of community in the school, and I had a racial bias towards Black youth. This bias was

preached to me through the local media, white parents, my professors in college, and the educators in that school. As a child, I had friends who were Black, and connected with them in multiple ways because we had similar interests. As a teacher, relationships are different because you are an adult working with children. Also, being in a suburban school without a sense of community made me standoffish. Black students did not trust the teachers because of negative interactions that took place both in the classrooms and hallways. It took my entire first year before I became comfortable and felt free to ask my students about their interests and have things we could talk about that we had in common outside of school. I always strived to be a friendly person that students could talk to and trust.

That first year, I was asking Black students to see things through a white lens instead of seeing them through theirs as a minority in a hostile environment without caring adults. I was asking students to be subservient and follow a template of directions without deviation, hampering their creativity. I would demonstrate the projects on the dry-erase board step by step and then ask the kids to duplicate the directions on paper. If a student didn't follow the directions, they would be asked to revise the project instead of letting them be creative and figure out different solutions. The results were technically sound pieces of artwork that all looked the same and did not have a personal voice. I did not take the time to get to know the students on a personal level. I was treating the students as robots on an assembly line and stripping the creativity from their souls. I wish I could teach those students again, but I can't rewind time. It is too late; the harm was done. These students are now grown adults who received biased instruction, negatively

impacting their self-esteem. This may have changed their trajectory as a student and as an adult, for which I must take full accountability as their teacher. Doing mental or psychological damage to another human being is a very difficult thing to come to terms with. Seeing this harm happen to Black students caused me to reflect.

I have since taken time to examine my past behavior, and I have done so through the lens of white racial identity. This came about during my graduate program in *Social Justice* over the last three years. As a result, I changed the way I taught students. I made sure the art projects were about the students' personal lives, including Black students. I found ways to show that I wanted them to be part of a caring community that honors their voices. We did this daily through open and honest dialogue that took time to develop. I would give students an overall theme, and they would take time to research the idea itself and how it relates to them. Students would then do a process called "mind mapping," which was a way to get students to think deeply about themselves and the world around them and how they wanted their artwork to be a form of expression to the public. They would be allowed to present this to the entire class in any form (sketching, writing, painting, etc.). The mind map became a powerful piece of artwork by itself, and each one looked entirely different from the next. As the students presented their ideas, others would be able to give feedback which would expand the conversations and take projects in different directions. The students would then be able to create their artwork with any materials they wanted, which was another way they could have a unique voice. This process empowered the students as artists, and I could see minority students finding a voice that eluded them before. I felt like I was providing opportunities for Black students'

souls to be healed from being spirit-murdered. This process did not happen quickly or in a vacuum.

My Growth As A Human

I want to take some time to discuss my continuing journey to become a better human being. It is a tough pill to swallow when you realize that not caring about Black children has always been a part of society. It is even more painful to realize that the same schools that made me feel safe made Black students feel anything but. I did not see the privilege I held as a white person, but I became aware of what being Black meant in society for my students. I could see how society mistreats Black people through white racist structures. It started as a realization that Black people were treated aggressively by white people because of their skin color. My awareness of being white started to change after entering this stage, but it was still at a very basic level of understanding.

Janet Helms describes White Racial Identity in various stages. One of the stages is “Disintegration,” which prompts the awareness of white privilege and knowing most of our country’s history is taught through this lens. A Black person is generally recognized by their skin color first and their achievements second, whereas a white person has the luxury of being an individual without race being attached. Here is an example: If you Google the painter Leonardo Da Vinci, it will give you the following: Leonardo Da Vinci was a scientist, engineer, inventor, and artist who created masterpieces like “Mona Lisa” and “The Last Supper.” In contrast, Google will say Jean Micheal Basquiat was a famous Black artist known for his graffiti creations in the underground art scene in New York. Andy Warhol discovered Basquiat’s talent and showed his work in his gallery. It is easy

to see the difference: Da Vinci is a self-made genius, and no race is mentioned. Basquiat was discovered by a white artist, making his talent valid, and race was mentioned first and foremost. Disintegration is something I am continually recognizing in my white identity.

Helms also discusses the stage of Reintegration, which brings forth the concept of white superiority. My family decided to buy a house in a less diverse area in the school district where I work. We said it was because of better schools, higher-valued real estate, and lower crime rates. All of this may be accurate financially and demographically, but it is also a constructed white thought process. There is a white ideology that deteriorating Black neighborhoods are a result of the negligence of the occupants and crime by its residents. The reality is that some Black neighborhoods are owned by white landlords who neglect them, and the crime is a result of the drugs and guns being trafficked into the area from other places. Analyst Zachary Hansen (2023) states:

Wall Street landlords are more than twice as likely to buy homes in African American neighborhoods than majority white communities. Large investment firms, backed by billions of dollars, have scooped up so much inventory in suburbs, experts say, they've inflated sales prices and wield outsize influence in the rental market, giving the firms substantial power to hike rents. They also have the financial firepower to outbid regular homebuyers, becoming another barrier for renters in minority areas to own a home and build equity. (p. 2-3)

How do you break the pattern unless you are part of the solution? This is a clear example of spirit-murder. White landlords taking advantage of Black tenants in the name

of progress, which is really the gentrification of neighborhoods. This is also connected to the classroom spaces. I am a white teacher and control the space the Black tenants come to occupy. How do I handle this responsibility? Am I raising the rent without giving Black students the resources to succeed? Do I provide the basic information and skills that would give them a chance at success? As the curriculum becomes more advanced, am I raising the “rent” too fast and evicting the Black students from their educational opportunities?

Helms goes on to describe a stage called Pseudo-Independence, which is where the positive white identity begins to be developed. I started recognizing and acknowledging racism from white people directed at minorities. I feel like this did not occur to me until I was teaching Black students in my district during my early twenties, where I saw many racist structures, such as tracking, discipline discrepancies, social interactions, etc., that were impacting the Black students. Before, I was blinded by the privilege I had as a white person in our society. I had to reconcile with myself, knowing that the educational system I am a part of consistently causes harm to Black children. A system that penalizes Black students for being social and asking questions. A system that tracks Black children into lower-level classes based on their skin color and not their aptitude. Structures that allow students of color to be put into ISS and detention just to get them out of the classroom. A system that is targeting Black children and hampering their opportunities for success.

The next stage of my development was Immersion. I started to understand the privilege I attained with the Whiteness of my skin. I stopped buying into stereotypes and

looked for the facts and racial ideals in our society. I believe this journey brought me to this program. I wanted to learn more about the truths about our racist educational system and acquire a clear understanding of what was happening to the Black students I teach. In my first years of teaching, I was trying to change the Black children in my class instead of embracing who they were and celebrating their individual identities. I was trying to teach all of the students in my class the same way. No matter what kind of background the students had, they were receiving the same exact lesson in the same manner. It was teaching like I didn't see color instead of embracing the differences and experiences students brought to the classroom. By not recognizing a student's identity, I was spirit-murdering them through my use of a common white ideology - not seeing color meant you were not racist. The structures that I bought into taught me to lump Black children together instead of seeing each child as an individual. The goal becomes changing white people to recognize these racist structures that need to be eradicated.

The last stage Helms discusses is Autonomy, which makes me think about how white people feel threatened by a Black person's success. I personally felt frustrated when I applied for administrative jobs early in my career. A few years after receiving my administrative certification, I applied for two jobs in my district and was not hired. The district decided to hire two minority candidates. I thought to myself that the two candidates were minorities and that is why they were chosen. This was a racist thought process, and I know it was wrong. I should have realized that both people were amazing educators who deserved the job more than me, and it was not based on race. I looked for an excuse as to why I was not hired instead of realizing I was not the most qualified

candidate. In my role as an athletic and activities administrator, I hire coaches and sponsors. I am always examining my thought process of hiring and how I do not want any racist ideals influencing who I hire.

As I reflect upon Helms' White Identity Development, I see that you can move interchangeably between stages. Once you know our racist structures, you can't unsee it. I have heard it compared to the cult-classic movie *Matrix*. Once the main character (Neo) realizes he lives in an invented world, he can't unsee it. I feel that is what I lived in for so many years. I lived in a white utopia where I did not have to recognize race as an issue. Now that I understand some of these structures, I see them all around me in every facet of life. From the way Black people are negatively treated at stores and banks to how quick school cops are to kick a Black kid out of a sporting event for doing the same action a white student gets away with. As an athletic director, I see how officials go out of their way to call violations against Black players and give advantages to all-white teams. My white racial identity is constantly evolving, and my mission is to open other white people's eyes to these racist realities while battling for social justice. I can influence those around me, and that community is growing as I have recently changed jobs, so I have the ability to reach more students and adults.

This journey of growth, discovery, and truth has impacted me as a high school coach. I have been fortunate to coach boys' and girls' basketball, boys' track and field, boys' cross country, and boys' golf. I have been an assistant and a head coach in each of these sports, with over twenty years of experience. As an assistant coach in track, I was in charge of finding students who would participate at a high level. I remember asking the

head coach how I should go about identifying these students in a school of over 1300 students. He said, “Look for tall, athletic-looking Black kids and ask them to come out.” This statement was very racist and held true to stereotypes. Again, I was part of a white structure that looked to take advantage of young Black children. The first thing I would ask Black kids in my class was, “Do you play any sports?” Why wasn’t I asking, “Do you have a role in the theatre production?” “Are you on student council?” or “What honors classes are you in?” The assumption that Black students came to our district from the city to play sports was prevalent. As a matter of fact, one of my first sprinters on the track team was from the city and was a tall, athletic Black male who excelled at the national level. He ended up running the fastest time in school history in the 100, 200, and 400 meters. I developed a close connection with this student because of athletics, but I couldn’t help but think that this connection was a result of a racist system that was using Black children to hang banners in county schools. If adults assume that a student is an athlete first and the academics are secondary, this is absolutely a form of spirit-murder. Racist stereotypes exist that Black children are athletes first and foremost. As white children are told they can be doctors and lawyers, Black students are told to be athletes. This weighed on me as an educator, and I noticed a need for this to change in my district.

In the last year, I became the athletic and activity director for a high school in the same district. We have a Title IX report each year that shows the data on how many students are participating in athletics at our school and their demographics. The numbers for male and female athletes are almost evenly distributed. We have 378 males and 374 females playing sports. With the rise of women’s lacrosse and field hockey, the numbers

based on gender have balanced out. I believe there needs to be the same inquiry into race. There is an imbalance of Black athletes participating in football, basketball, and track compared to white athletes in “country club” sports like golf, tennis, swimming, and cross country. Is this based on access? How do I examine this data and find ways to increase minority participation in other sports? Studies show a direct correlation between sports participation and increased academic success. A study done by Kathy Boone-Ginter (2022) of the National Federation of High School Athletics suggests that being involved in sports has a huge benefit to high school-aged students. She found that “Students involved in athletics are 20 percent more likely to earn top marks in math, science, and English and had significantly higher grade point averages. Moreover, high school student-athletes are more likely to attend college and earn a degree than their counterparts.” Having more students of color in these programs could result in a deeper connection with the school and improved performance in the classroom. The success in the classroom should demonstrate they are academically intelligent students first and foremost. Recognition of the student being a scholar would be a way to lift one’s spirit.

Even if a Black student has success in the athletic arena and attends college, the jobs available for Black college graduates are still limited. For example, I attended a national convention for athletic directors that had over 1000 participants. A vast majority of directors are white males, even though that is not representative of those who participate in high school sports. The concept of intersectionality plays a dominant role in who becomes an athletic director. In the county schools of St. Louis, we have six people of color who are athletic directors and only one who is a Black female. Again, I am part

of this racist structure as a white male athletic director. As I examine other ways to change these white structures, I think about hiring practices in my district. I recently hired a Black female to coach track and a Black male to coach golf. These are the first Black coaches in those sports ever at this school, which has been in existence for over fifty years. I plan to continue hiring a diverse group of coaches with the hope that children will connect with them as mentors. I want these students to see other people of color as leaders around them, which in turn shows they can also become.

Spirit-Murdering Black Athletes

One story sticks out in my memory. It was 2006 and I was in my late 20's. I was teaching and coaching at a high school in suburban St. Louis. This was my sixth year teaching and coaching in the public school system. Basketball was something I loved playing and was a big part of my life from elementary school on. I wanted to impart my love for the game to the kids at the school, and I was trying to do this by coaching the freshman boys' team. I felt excited because I was part of a successful program that usually won twenty or so games per year and went deep into the State playoffs. The head varsity coach was a white male who was also the athletic director. He stood about six foot four inches tall and had a skinny build with a thick mustache and combed over brown hair. When he interviewed me for the job, I remember some of the questions being about character, and he talked about tradition and the way things were done at that school. Part of the discussion was about how to punish athletes who misbehave in a game. His policy was to sit the student for the rest of the game and possibly the next game as well,

depending on the infraction. I understood that he wanted structure and had rules for the program. I gladly accepted the job and couldn't wait for practice to start.

Basketball practice started November 1st, and we had over forty students try out for the team. We could only keep twelve freshman boys, so the kids who made the team were talented. I remember one student really stood out as far as his ball-handling skills and positive personality. His name was Mike, and he was a Black male who stood about five feet tall and weighed all of 100 pounds. Mike was a Voluntary Interdistrict Transfer Student, which meant that he lived in St. Louis City and was bused out to the suburban West County school. He would get up at 4:30 am to catch the bus and not get home until 7 pm on normal practice nights (game nights were even later). We had ten or so Black students from the city in the boys' basketball program that year, which meant they took a bus that dropped them off at night. Sometimes, they would take cabs after games, which were not dependable. The season was about four months long, so it was hard for these kids to keep up their grades with homework, sports, and transportation issues. Even with this difficulty, the city students were performing well in the basketball program and were making good grades (A's and B's) in the classroom.

At the end of the season, we played in a tournament against a rival school district. Our team was talented enough to make it to the championship game. Mike was our starting point guard and was doing a fantastic job at that position. He was able to run the offense and not turn the ball over and played hard on defense. I would say that Mike was a key part of our team, almost like the quarterback on the floor. This particular game was very tight, and the lead changed on practically every possession. Mike was dribbling

down the court with about a minute left in the game, and the referee called him for “palming the ball,” which is a travel (a violation that gives possession to the other team). Mike was frustrated because he had not been called for it all game long, and now, at the most important point of the game, the referee decided to call it. He took the basketball and dribbled it hard into his hands. The referee immediately called a technical foul on Mike for slamming the ball. He thought Mike was being disrespectful through his actions. Mike put his head down, did not say anything to the referee, and walked over to the bench, apologizing to me along the way. I honestly did not think Mike slammed the ball hard or was trying to “show up” the referee, so in my opinion, the technical foul should not have been called. At the beginning of this story, I talked about player behavior being handled by the coach during my interview for the job with the head of the program. As I thought about that conversation, I took Mike out of the game at a critical time, and he sat on the bench until the game was completed.

Because of the technical foul, the other team shot two free throws, which they hit one and got the ball out of bounds. The opponent took the ball out of bounds and came down the floor with a three-point lead. We were playing a press defense because we were down by three with less than thirty seconds remaining. Fortunately, one of our players made a great play and stole the ball from one of their guards. He hustled down the floor, dribbling with excitement. I took a timeout once we crossed half-court. There were about five seconds left on the clock, and one of our players hit a three-point shot to tie the game. It was a fantastic shot, and the kids were excited to go into an extra period. Mike was even pumped and cheered on his team. The question was, what do I do with Mike in

overtime? The policy was clear, but do I follow it or let Mike back in the game? I remember thinking that we were part of a program, and I needed to do what was asked, so I sat Mike in overtime. I could tell that the team was disappointed, and so was Mike. We went on to lose the championship game, which may not have happened if Mike played in the extra period.

As I examine this situation, several questions come to mind. Would I have made the same decision with a white player? Why didn't I question the structures that were in place more vigorously? The technical foul that was called was coming from a white referee at a key moment in the game. Was the call made based on race since we were playing an all-white team that was far more aggressive? Why did I not say something to the referee as the coach? How did all the other players view this event, and how did it impact the game? How did this affect Mike in the future as a player, teammate, and student?

Mike gave me everything he had, and I failed him in my actions or non-actions. I should have said something to the referee, even if it meant another technical. I spirit-murdered Mike and didn't think twice about it at the time. I see white systems all around us, especially in sports. As a current athletic director, this concerns me, and I feel the systems need to change. The current white structures promote players who exert themselves physically and do not have any emotion towards their opponents, coaches, or officials, but people are not robots that can be turned off and on. Why is this happening? Shouldn't sports be fun and a level playing field no matter your race?

You would have to go back to the origins of different sports. Typically, they were created by white males and segregated minorities and females from playing. The structures were meant to promote white male athletes. Many of the first sports commissioners were retired military generals. Some of the most famous coaches in history, like Mike Krzyzewski, Bob Knight, Tom Landry, and John Wooden, came from a military background and are all white males. This highlights the impact military structures have in modern sports. Even though sports integrated Black athletes years ago, racist structures are still in place from time periods before the integration. This is also the case with Title IX and female participation in sports. As previously mentioned, I was able to attend the National Athletic Director Conference this last year, and you can see the reason for this discrepancy. Over 90% of athletic directors are white males, including myself. Very few athletic directors are Black, and even fewer are female. These are the people making decisions at the national level on rule changes and policies. You might ask how this ties into my coaching decision with Mike. I am a white male making decisions about playing time, based on white structures taught to me that are engrained from a racist military history and biased white male coach. This decision may have negatively impacted Mike mentally by my choice to sit him out. My own education, coaching background, and biases are also rooted in this system. I had a white athletic director, and all of my coaches were white in high school. All of my mentors in coaching were white, which formed biases based on limited contact with Black educators and coaches. How do we break out of this system? The first step is to recognize the racist white structures and acknowledge that they exist. The next step is to be willing to change the structures. We

could do this by hiring more minority coaches, administrators, and athletic directors. I can also demonstrate my desire for change by speaking up consistently when injustices are done to Black athletes, as they deserve advocates.

I coached track and cross country for over twenty years. Until last year there was not a Black cross country coach in the West St. Louis County school systems (both public and private). Hiring a head cross-country coach who is Black took almost sixty years after sports integration. Track and field was one of the first major sports to integrate athletes. Today, a majority of high school athletes that participate are Black. As a direct result, more Black athletes participate in college, and there are more Black coaches in track and field. Even with the rise of Black participation and coaching, the sport has changed very little. I was once told that there is only one way to win a race, but there are 1000 ways to lose the race. The thought process behind this is a person can get disqualified in a variety of ways, and some of them are subjective and are veiled racist rules.

A relay team of four players must have matching uniforms, or they will be disqualified. I remember several times when teams from lower-income Black communities were disqualified for this infraction. Usually, after the race is already completed, opposing coaches look for infractions. I was one of these coaches, looking for infractions to help my school win. I wanted to win no matter what the cost was to another team. I looked for advantages to help my team, even if it was based on racist rules. I was spirit-murdering these athletes and coaches by looking for ways to disqualify teams from the competitions. Years later I had to honestly ask myself, "Why does this rule exist?"

This was prompted by one of my colleagues, who was a track coach in a predominately Black school, who brought this to my attention. He stated that racist rules existed everywhere in high school sports. The uniforms were the same colors but did not match exactly because the school could not afford that many new ones at one time. The same thing happens in pole vault competitions, where schools have to buy new poles every few years so the wealthy schools can afford to compete. A pole vault pit costs over \$20,000, meaning most low-income schools can't even afford a pit to train. At the Missouri state track and field meet last year, only two Black athletes were competing in the pole vault. Not only does this impact the individual kids, but it also impacts the overall team scores that accumulate with each event. These structures put low-income schools at a disadvantage to win a meet. I was part of this system as a track coach and did not realize these structures were rooted in racist ideals. Low-income schools, typically minority populations, couldn't afford matching uniforms or the equipment needed for some events like pole vault. When a track meet is decided by just a few points, having access to all events is vital. This can also determine who goes on to the next competition, like in the postseason.

I feel horrible about this. I loved sports and being an athlete, so becoming a coach was a natural progression. My love of sports was never impeded by finances or what my district could afford. Yet this was another way that I was spirit-murdering Black children. I never thought about this, never even considered it. The opportunity gap is often mentioned in regard to academics, but it is just as prevalent in extracurricular activities as well. Realizing I was and continue to be a part of a racist system makes me feel sick to

my stomach. I used these racist rules to my advantage and spirit-murdered Black athletes in the process. Some of these kids may have missed out on the accolades of their performances and, even worse, missed out on opportunities for their future. Did using these rules to help my team win cost a Black child the opportunity for college? This awareness is hard to admit, but an important step in the direction of not repeating the same action. I can't change the past, but I can be an advocate for Black student-athletes in the future through my job as an athletic director.

As I examine why I was inadvertently teaching these white structures, I realize not only was my education rooted in these systems, but so was my mentoring and evaluations. Was it really unintentional, or was I just going along with the status quo and not challenging my own beliefs once I was aware? I was embracing, living, believing in, and using these systems as part of my daily practices. In my first year of teaching, I was part of a mentoring program that was supposed to help teachers become better instructors in the classroom. I now understand that becoming a better teacher in this district meant using white systems to create a racist learning environment. The environment she was wanting would be quiet and socially restrictive. Students who were compliant and worked the entire time were rewarded with higher grades and praise. My evaluating assistant principal would come by my room and see kids talking and laughing, which she took as a lack of classroom management and structure. She would ask to see lesson plans over a month before the lesson was supposed to be taught. She wanted to know why I didn't have a seating chart and why kids could take art supplies out of the classroom. This assistant principal had a meeting with me and demanded that I change all of these

practices. In her mind, my way of teaching would cause discipline problems and interrupt other classes. She thought I should know exactly what to expect from my students before every lesson started. I reflect and think about why I changed the way I taught and connected with kids just for her evaluation. It came down to keeping my job, and I was young and impressionable. She had the power to recommend me to either be rehired or fired, as I was a yearly employee without tenure. I followed her directions and instituted seating charts that broke up the friend groups. I demanded the kids work quietly and follow the prescribed lesson plans exactly so that way if the evaluating principal walked into my class, they would be impressed by the procedures in place. It took me about two years to realize she was wrong. My connections with kids were worse with these systems, especially the Black students. I was not getting to know them as individuals, and some were struggling in my art classes because of the prescribed step-by-step directions. At this point, I decided to change my classroom back to the way I started teaching. Students could talk, laugh, and ask questions. I got to know my students as human beings and appreciated what they were into. We used their interests to guide their artwork, and everyone's projects looked different and unique. Self-expression and compassion became the most important parts of the class. It was not about the end product looking similar to a professional example and every project looking the same. It was not about the art show at the end of the year. And guess what? My discipline referrals were still one of the lowest in school. I only had to send two kids to the office in over five years of teaching in that building. My evaluations were not hindered in any way because it was evident that what I was doing was working. Having real connections with Black students reduced the

discipline issues. Why do we think being quiet is a sign of working hard? I see plenty of students that zone out and don't say anything. They are supposed to be deemed better behaved than a child who is social and makes friendships with their peers. Again, this is a white cultural mentality taught to us from elementary school throughout our educational experience. I remember saying to students, "Act like you are in church; work quietly." That may be the structure in their church, but that is not the same with all cultures. Some churches are very social, and the congregation participates in the worship. If a white instructor is saying this to a Black child, is that not spirit-murder? This is indirectly telling them that their way of worshiping is wrong.

The bottom line is that inaction is worse than action in education. I committed spirit-murder over and over again. There is no excuse. I used white school systems and structures to harm the Black children in my classroom. Usually, it was by not taking action or speaking up when the opportunity presented itself. I recognize now that I need to use my voice and not be afraid of examining these white systems that are harmful and do my part to speak out against them. I need to examine how I can do this in my current position as an athletic and activities director. These systems will not be changed overnight, but I feel my job is to serve all students, and I can do a better job for the Black children that are in my district. When opportunities to speak up present themselves, I need to be ready.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Introduction and Summary of Study

We can all remember the first time we heard the phrase spirit-murder because it impacted each of us profoundly. One of our mentors, Dr. Mayes, mentioned it in class during the second semester of our *Social Justice* Doctorate Program at UMSL. She then encouraged us to research Bettina Love's work on this topic. We were captivated and took the idea and ran with it. After much thought, we decided to focus on the fact that Black students were being spirit-murdered within schools and classrooms, places that should have been safe but were not. The spaces were unsafe because of racist school systems and harsh policies that involved biased discipline, academic tracking, and uniform and hair policies that impacted Black children at high rates.

Spirit-murder (Williams, 1987; Love, 2016) was the central phenomenon that became our conceptual framework. It occurs when children of color are taught or led to believe that they are inferior (Wright-Mair and Pulido, 2020). It is an act of racialized oppression used in this research concerning educators and staff members in positions of authority causing emotional harm to Black children. Patricia Williams created the term in the legal field and it was later identified in education through the work of Dr. Bettina Love. The denial of inclusion, safety, protection, nurturing, and acceptance due to rigid yet flexible and moldable racist structures is known as spirit-murder (Love, 2016). Anytime we tell Black children that they are not enough, or that their culture and practices are unacceptable and wrong, and that they need to be more like their white peers, we are spirit-murdering them.

We knew from our personal involvement that Black students were consistently spirit-murdered to control and disregard their identity and what matters to them. In doing this, white educators in positions of authority perpetuated racist practices designed to cause trauma to Black kids. Our group always intended to do qualitative research, and it became apparent early on in our journey that as a very balanced and diverse group, we could bring different perspectives to our topic, spirit-murder, but we were uncertain about how we intended to do this. We wanted to hear from our Black co-workers and Black former students about how spirit-murdering had impacted them, and how our white co-workers spirit-murdered the Black students in their classrooms. We knew this would prove to be difficult, but we were up for the challenge. One thing that we counted on was the diversity of our research group. There was one white female, one Black female, one white male, and one Black male; all educators and leading in different capacities. We knew that our participants would respond differently to each of us and we could learn so much from their experiences.

We each wrote about ourselves as it related to spirit-murder in what we called anchor stories to introduce readers to the topic on a more personal level. In doing this, the goal was to connect, relate, and share with our readers, allowing them to learn about spirit-murder from our accounts. It was in the fall of our last semester that we decided to change our methodology and write an autoethnography, determining that this research methodology had already been used in our anchor stories and that the wealth of our experiences could add new perspectives to examine the effects of spirit-murder.

Although we were nervous, autoethnography was an authentic form of research that

could blend our deeply personal stories, experiences, and encounters with racialized oppression. We decided to give a first-hand account of how we had committed acts of spirit-murder while teaching Black students in our classrooms and how we endured these racist microaggressions as Black students in white teacher's classrooms. We hoped that the results of this research would lead educators to understand how to better teach, serve, advocate, and support their Black students, as well as the process of how to recognize privilege and bias within one's self as an educator of Black children.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

To understand what we found, we must first understand what we sought to accomplish. There were many aims for our study; one of the most important was the acknowledgment of the phenomenon of spirit-murdering of Black students by white educators through autoethnography, our personal narratives, and examples of how we experienced and struggled with this (Ellis, 2004). Another purpose for our study that mattered deeply to us was being able to share what led the white teachers in our group to recognize the misbehavior towards Black children. Even though it was difficult to address, we wanted to bring to light what resources guided them along their ongoing, lifelong journey towards recognizing their actions, mindsets, and beliefs that were affecting the Black students that they taught. Another purpose of this study was to begin the healing process of the Black educator's traumatic pasts. Each of us wanted to pinpoint how we could begin advocating for Black children starting now and in the future. As individual educators, we want readers to become aware and make sure they try to prevent

harm by being able to more quickly identify what spirit-murdering looks like in the educational setting.

Our problem statement was our realization that we had been a part of the racially oppressive cycle that hurts Black children. In this, we had to admit that all four of us were guilty of spirit-murdering Black/Latinx students entrusted in our care and classrooms during our careers; and we had to acknowledge that two of us had our spirits murdered by white educators in our pasts, and although these experiences were traumatic, we ended up spirit-murdering the Black students in our classes once we became educators (Love, 2016). The questions that fueled our research addressed the issues presented in our problem statement. We made sure to develop questions based on the makeup of our research group. Since this was an autoethnographic study, we needed to ask questions about our personal experiences in and out of the classroom.

We generated a question that spoke specifically to our Black educators who experienced spirit-murdering as students, and that would also highlight how our experiences affected us both personally and professionally. Our second question was written because the two Black educators were also guilty of spirit-murdering their Black and Brown students, and we wanted to analyze if this could possibly be the result of internalized oppression. Our last two questions were specifically written for the two white educators, and it allowed them the opportunity to describe their spirit-murdering actions toward Black students, and what inspired them to begin a journey of consistently challenging their past practices and to make changes. Our four central questions were: 1. How does experiencing repeated acts of spirit-murder affect me (you) personally and

professionally? 2. Can incidents of spirit-murder between and amongst Black people be an expression/manifestation of internalized oppression? 3. How do white educators spirit-murder Black children in their classrooms? 4. What inspires a white person to confront racism?

Through our counterstories and examples, we have shown that spirit-murder exists; we have witnessed it, experienced it, and caused it. Offering these specifics can shed light on a lesser-known and complex phenomenon, which can prevent future harm and promote healing for those who have been spirit-murdered. It can also provide validation to those who have experienced it. We found that being spirit-murdered by white educators and spirit-murdering Black students was brutal to accept, reflect on, and share. It was damaging and traumatic to our psyches, our emotions, and how we viewed the world, but we couldn't unsee or undo it. We have to exist in a state of re-experiencing our encounters and examples. The struggle centered on how to move forward in a way that was authentic and forgiving but also dedicated to changing spirit-murdering practices in schools. In learning to forgive those who were guilty and ourselves for doing it, we learned how to advocate too. Black children do not deserve any more mistreatment and emotional violence, and we each concluded, no matter our encounters, that we would work to eliminate them.

Carol Anderson describes how "well-intentioned" educators actually do tremendous harm to Black children through white structures in her book *White Rage*. Two of our white researchers were able to identify and examine how they were part of these detrimental systems (both intentionally and unintentionally). Two of our Black

researchers explain how they encountered, endured, contributed to, and overcame spirit-murder in their own lives.

A few themes that surfaced after analyzing spirit-murder within our counter-stories were: internalized oppression, distrust, embarrassment, and anger. The themes that surfaced after analyzing spirit-murder within our examples were: guilt, shame, taking accountability for our actions, and disappointment in our own actions. The overall theme from all four counter-stories/examples was our awareness of spirit-murder as an act that harms children of color. It took deep reflection, and painful honesty to admit these emotions and themes, but we persisted because of our dedication to our work, and in hopes that our research could someday help others to do better and advocate against racially oppressive school systems that harm children of color.

The two Black researchers, Courtney and Casetta, experienced spirit-murder as it was being done to our sons. Both of us grappled back and forth between feelings of shame and helplessness. It was unimaginably difficult to remain professional in the face of such encounters with white teachers. Ultimately, we felt we had to play the *game* to ensure that our boys made it safely across the finish line. Because of this, and even empowered with knowledge, we still gave in and didn't truly address it because we wanted to keep our children safe in the ways that we could. The two white researchers, Brian and Sarah, struggled with admitting that they engaged in harmful behaviors that hurt students that they taught and coached. Even though they did this unconsciously, they acknowledged their mistakes and their process for enlightenment. We found that sharing our stories and examples was more difficult than we imagined, yet meaningful, insightful,

and significant. The significance of our study was that the information would be important to educators, parents, and stakeholders who want what is best for Black children. Our study is also significant because it speaks directly to how spirit-murdered Black children can overcome and how people who engaged in this behavior in the past can change.

Through this study, we have also learned to value personal reflection. It is because of our reflections that we have gained insight. It is because we reflected on our pasts with spirit-murdering, that we were able to elevate our voices using counter-narratives as a tenet of Critical Race Theory. We have been able to use our personal examples and stories as relatable suggestions to combat spirit-murdering from white educators toward Black students during their experiences. Our work may have helped to expose not only the existence and effects of spirit-murder but also ways we are working to advocate against these unfair acts and practices. In reading our stories and examples, educators can learn what they shouldn't do from our experiences. In understanding our feelings and reflections, educators will learn how to better support Black children in classrooms where racist school systems still exist.

As a research group, we sought to add to the existing literature and offer strategies for not only macro-educational systems change, but educators' individual practices as well. Being reflective has allowed us to do this and bring awareness to teachers that spirit-murder their students unintentionally. "Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors, and more

importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different to realize that things need not always be this way” (Kelley, 2002, p. 9).

Intersectionality: Parents as Educators and the Impact of this Study

Courtney’s Research Experience as a Parent and Educator

My experience as a parent and as an educator was both difficult and enlightening. My son was very young when he started to experience being spirit-murdered. He was a second grader that was forced to navigate the complexities of implicit and explicit biases in society that adults three times his age have difficulty with. I watched as my son changed from a mostly light-hearted young man, into an angry child that scowled at the mention of school. At the time, I was an administrator in the same district that he was in (in fact the school he attended was also in my network, which meant that I worked closely with his principal often), which only added an additional level of privilege because I was able to know about policies and procedures prior to them being put in place. I was able to ensure my son had a leg up in certain instances. However, this close rapport also created a level of difficulty in that he was expected to do more and be better. Multiple times his teacher would say “your father is an administrator, you should know better.” This statement still triggers me. My job title does not negate him from being a normal second grader and making the traditional mistakes that a second grade child would make. In addition, I had to check my response in various situations because I worked closely with the same people that were spirit-murdering my child. In education there is an unwritten rule that you should support your teammates no matter what. I was

forced to juggle between the fact that, although we were colleagues, they were doing things that were not beneficial to my son's academic and emotional well-being.

However, I was fortunate in that this situation occurred during the time that I was enrolled in this program. Through reading and the research we were doing, I was able to identify various characteristics of spirit-murdering. If I had not been studying and enrolled in this program, then I would not have been able to identify them thoroughly. This research and being an educator has equipped me with the ability to repair his spirit. The intentional work of rebuilding his self-esteem within himself academically started during the summer, and him being able to go to a new school and have a fresh start has been pivotal as well. We are not completely past this experience, but we are well on our way.

Casetta's Research Experience as a Parent and Educator

My experience as a parent and educator was extremely difficult because my son was only four years old and was spirit-murdered because of the color of his skin. There were other rambunctious children in this teacher's classroom, but she only focused on what she deemed as my son's misbehavior. I had to balance my knowledge of knowing that my son was being treated unfairly with the need to keep him safe. I could not say what I wanted to, sharing the research and facts about what was being done to him. I had to play a part in a balancing act where I shared just enough with the teacher so that she knew that I knew that her practices towards my child were oppressive and inappropriate; I also had to remain respectful, polite, professional, and open at all times to ensure that my son's mental and emotional wellbeing wouldn't be damaged worse than it already

was. I refused to do anything that I thought would make him more unsafe while he was away from me. This was one of the hardest things that I have ever had to do, protect him while not letting on that I knew just how bad things were. My son deserves to be safe at all times, treated fairly, and given every opportunity afforded to him. This was not the case and it was a major struggle for me since I know, as an educator, the damage that was being done and the potential for how much worse it could have become. Fortunately, I am an educator, and I know the tools that are needed to heal my son's murdered spirit. He will need care, attention, praise, positivity, patience, and feedback focused on his strengths as his family and I work to rebuild his spirit. I am grateful for having studied the concept, spirit-murder, as now that I am aware, I can advocate for my children and other Black children with the correct knowledge in place in the future.

Sarah's Research Experience as a Parent and Educator

When my son was in third grade, he started to struggle in school. Over many emails and phone calls from his teacher, I got the sense this teacher was frustrated and had given up trying to help him. In my mind, I chalked it up to her lack of patience or inability to connect with him due to their personalities, but something I never had to consider was whether it was based on his race. I never had to consider whether my comments would come across to the teacher as me being an "aggressive, angry, white woman" as we were both white women. In my many conversations with Casetta and Courtney about their sons' struggles with teachers, I felt unable to navigate their particular situations because of the racial element present. Being white, I typically have not had to consider my race when communicating with my kids' teachers because they

have been mostly white and female. After completing this program, I realize that in our white dominated-culture, I have typically not had to consider my race in many situations and have taken this for granted. Becoming a parent, however, has made me a much more empathetic teacher. I know that parenting is much harder than I would have ever expected, and I find myself giving more grace to both parents and their kids, knowing how difficult it can be to get kids to do what you want them to do. Learning about Casetta's and Courtney's experiences made me even more aware of the differences between our experiences as both students and parents, and I need to be more actively against racism, and more patient and empathetic to every student and parent I encounter.

Brian's Research Experience as a Parent and Educator

As a parent of two white males, I have seen them struggle academically and emotionally in their public schools. I have advocated for them on several occasions because of issues in regards to other children's behavior. These struggles pale in comparison to what Black children and parents go through on a daily basis. My children have never been mistreated because of their skin color. School is a safe space for my children where most children and adults care about their well-being and want them to succeed. They have been targets of bullies and haven't always had the best support system in their classrooms, but this was never a result of their skin tone. After listening to Casetta's and Courtney's stories, my heart breaks for what they experience daily from every part of society. I can't imagine my children attending a school where adults do not have their best interests in mind at all times. I take for granted the privileges of being

white and need to open my eyes to the racist behaviors in our school systems. All students should feel loved and protected.

Theoretical Implications

Sharing specific examples of spirit-murder connects with both Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023) and Critical Whiteness Theory (CWT) (Hunter and van der Westhuizen, 2022) by centering the marginalized voices of our Black teammates, their children, and the students we spirit-murdered. Sharing our stories validates the experiences of those who were spirit-murdered and exposes the dehumanizing and undermining done by white people to assert their power. By exposing how we spirit-murdered students, we are analyzing the power dynamics and interrogating systems of oppression. Educators can use these stories to examine how racism operates both on an individual and a systemic level, as well as how it intersects with other forms of oppression.

Practical Implications

Many things could happen as a result of this research regarding how Black children are taught, treated, disciplined, loved, taught, supported, and affirmed in classrooms. As educators and parents, we all want our children to succeed and have a positive experience in school. Education is our life's work, and we want to inspire the next generation. This can only happen if there is an awareness of how each student is impacted by the systems (both harmful and beneficial) that are in place. We want our experiences to help illuminate and reduce these racist systems. Spirit-murdering must cease, and we have worked to reveal the practice so that this can happen, inspiring those

who already know better to become more courageous in intolerable situations with their peers and impact change. Sharing our stories can promote awareness and understanding, encourage dialogue and discussion, validate the experiences of marginalized students, empower students to take action, foster cultural competence, and support healing and resilience.

Future Implications

Now that we have identified spirit-murdering in our lives, it would not be as easy to go back to a state of unawareness, because when you know better, you do better. Even our white researchers now have heightened situational awareness of these inhumane practices. This does not mean that they will never spirit-murder Black children again, but it does mean that they are now aware of what these behaviors look, sound, and feel like; and knowledge is power. Life for us as educators will forever be different. Because spirit-murder has been identified and examined in each of the researcher's lives, we can see how common it is in our society. It is so common in our society that when an unaware person commits spirit-murder, they may not question the occurrence or understand the impact of what they are doing. It took us to research our own encounters with it to become aware of occurrences and be able to recognize and understand the impact of what we were doing. The future implications are the need for educators to identify these harmful behaviors in their teaching practices. Once they are identified, educators need to be held accountable for their actions by their schools, their students, and themselves if they are committing them knowingly. Professional development on becoming culturally responsive would assist educators in reflecting and determining if they are doing this

unconsciously, and addressing how to shift their mindsets and transform their teaching practices. Racially oppressive systems, such as inequitable discipline practices, hair and uniform policies that are inconsiderate of Black children, and unfair academic tracking, need to change to accommodate all children from all backgrounds. Every child should feel safe, appropriately challenged, nurtured, and like they belong when attending school.

We know that it is highly unlikely that we will prevent all future harm to Black children with our research. However, we know that real educators who care for their students might encounter this research and be inspired to process, grapple with, and reflect on their past experiences and how their future behavior can become what Black children need. Even with this new awareness, a person may still commit spirit-murder which creates a system where we have to hold each other to a higher standard and accept that humans will make mistakes but need to strive to be better to one another. In addition, our stories could help shape future perspectives, foster empathetic and inclusive leaders, inspire more research and scholarship, cultivate critical consciousness, and promote intergenerational and interracial dialogue.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study

The greatest strengths of our study are our honesty, authenticity, and empowerment of marginalized voices. The strength of our research lies in our team and our personal stories. Two white educators (one male, one female) and two Black educators (one male, one female) shared their pasts authentically. Even though there were only four educators, all of us were able to tell our stories from a unique perspective. Autoethnography allowed us to examine our pasts and expose how we are

part of this colonial education system. It challenged each of us to realize how little we have done to prevent spirit-murder from occurring to our past students or how helpless we feel when it occurs to those around us.

Because of the deeply personal nature of autoethnography, our stories are subjective and biased because our experiences are influenced by our emotions, perspectives, and preconceptions. Also, we are only offering a handful of examples, which critics could argue are not enough to prove the existence of spirit-murder. We also don't provide absolute solutions. We expose spirit-murder in each of our lives, but it is a different experience for each person. We do not explain how to change or combat the systemic racist structures that are in place; we only discuss how to do this within one's self after discovering our encounters and involvement with them. We also do not talk about how to hold educators accountable when they commit spirit-murder. Our study was qualitative and allowed us to closely examine several occurrences of spirit-murder. A quantitative study could uncover the prevalence of spirit-murder and the frequency of these actions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although our four stories of spirit-murder show its detrimental effects, multiple experiences are certainly more convincing and powerful. More examples of spirit-murder would uncover more white structures that are in place. Through our autoethnographies, we each took time to examine the psychological impact that spirit-murder had on us, both as victims and offenders. We also examined personal experiences, and how the Black researchers' children have been spirit-murdered. With this in mind, we believe that this

study highlights the psychological impact on those who are in K-12 educational institutions that may be struggling with equitably educating Black students. Based on our research, we suggest the following recommendations for future research:

1. A quantitative study on the frequency of spirit-murder would stress the significance of these events on the individual and the society around them. Future research on spirit-murdering in schools can shed light on the psychological impact it has on Black students. By delving into the experiences of those affected, researchers can identify the long-term consequences on mental health, self-esteem, and academic performance, which will be beneficial to all stakeholders in education.
2. Future research on the development of support systems can inform various resources tailored to the needs of victims and targets of spirit-murdering. By understanding the specific challenges faced by these individuals, educators and mental health professionals can offer targeted interventions to promote resilience and healing. This would be beneficial for adults who may have unhealed trauma that has hindered them in their adult lives.
3. Continued research in investigating spirit-murder and its effects in schools aligns with efforts to foster inclusive education environments. Research findings can inform policies and practices aimed at promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, ensuring that all students feel valued, respected, and supported in their educational journey.

4. Policymakers could use current and future research to better understand spirit-murder so that they can eradicate it.
5. Continued research should also focus on the development of preventive strategies and interventions to create safer and more inclusive school environments.

Understanding the root causes and triggers of spirit-murdering incidents can help educators and policymakers implement proactive measures to address these issues effectively. This will help ensure that schools are safe spaces for Black students at the onset of their educational journey.

Recommendations for Future Practice - Focus on the “How”

We would like to encourage future practice to include the process the four researchers took in addressing spirit-murder. We each began by reflecting on our past experiences and examples of how we have been spirit-murdered and how we engaged in it and caused harm to our students. Reflecting on these encounters was not an easy process, and at times, it felt like we were stripping our souls. This created extreme levels of uncertainty and vulnerability, but we did not waiver. We told our truths, authentically, no matter how embarrassing or how guilty we felt. We took much-needed breaks throughout our process in addressing our behaviors. We leveraged one another as thought-partners, and humbled ourselves to the feedback that we received. We then started the cycle over again by reflecting. This led to how we addressed our engagement with spirit-murder. It was honest, painful, and difficult, but so very meaningful as to being able to change how we advocate differently for Black children in the future. This is how educators can approach the heinous acts of spirit-murder in future practice.

We hope that all educators who read our stories will become more aware of what spirit-murder is and be able to recognize and interrupt it in their own and others' educational practices. We challenge educators to not only recognize and examine the spirit-murder they have been a part of but also look for ways to change the structures that encourage these racist beliefs. With over 80% of educators being white, there is a need for recognition and systemic change. Based on our research, we would recommend a multitude of changes for future practice, including:

1. Educators must actively and intentionally promote a culture of inclusivity and respect where differences are celebrated and valued and where Black students feel safe to be their authentic selves. This can be achieved through intentional anti-bias training, regular discussions, and activities that promote understanding, empathy, and appreciation for diversity in all its forms. In addition, this would also include facing spirit-murdering head-on when it arises.
2. Schools should ensure that educators and staff receive ongoing training and professional development on identifying, addressing, and preventing spirit-murdering behaviors. Training should include strategies for creating inclusive classroom environments, effectively managing conflicts and providing support to students who are targets or perpetrators of spirit-murdering.
3. Current school structures that disproportionately penalize Black students, such as suspensions and tracking, need to be replaced with restorative, proactive, and culturally responsive practices.

4. Students should be encouraged to play an active role in creating a positive school climate by empowering their voices and perspectives. Schools should establish student-led initiatives, and groups like Black student unions and other diversity groups so that students have a chance to collaborate to address spirit-murdering behaviors and create student-led solutions that can lead to the inclusion of everyone.
5. Schools should implement comprehensive education and awareness programs that address the root causes and consequences of spirit-murdering. These programs should educate students and staff about how their words and actions affect those around them. The programs should also give concrete ways to alter their words and actions so that spirit-murdering does not occur again.

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