



I Love My Hair: The Weaponizing of Black Girls Hair by Educators in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

The study explored the experiences and perceptions of Black girls as conveyed through the narratives of their parents. In particular, this study focused on racial microaggressions in early childhood education (preschool through third grade). The study employed narratives written by 44 parents of Black children. Ultimately, their narratives demonstrated that Black hair was viewed as a marker of second-class citizenship and as an indicator of defilement. The individuals communicating these microaggressions ranged from educators to other children in the classroom. Negative messages about Black hair are particularly concerning in early childhood education, especially given the important role early learning has on children's formative development. Implications for early childhood educators are extended.

Keywords Black girls · Children · Hair · Early childhood education · Microaggressions

Don't need a trip to the beauty shop, cause I love what I got on top. It's curly and it's brown and it's right up there! You know what I love? That's right, my hair! I really love my hair. I love my hair. I love my hair. There's nothing else that can compare with my hair. I love my hair, so I must declare: I really, really, really love my hair.

In 2010, Sesame Street released the song "I Love My Hair" accompanied with a dark-skinned, Afro-adorned Muppet singing proudly about her love for her Black hair. The song was designed to be a positive affirmation for Black girls who may face challenges in embracing the uniqueness and beauty of Black hair (Lindsey and Hopper 2010). Shortly after being released, the song went viral and was met with an emotional response by Black women and girls who have been taught by society to view their hair as inferior (Darden 2010).

Hair is a critical topic in Black life and culture, serving to shape how Black girls and women encounter the world (Jacobs-Huey 2006). In early ages of their development, Black girls view innumerable hair styles that have circumscribed meanings for social status, political orientation,

spirituality, and ease. These styles range widely, including Afros, weaves, dreadlocks, twists, braids, perms, curls, and cornrows. However, early research from Cooper (1971) showed hair types and styles serve to denote differential levels of status. Therefore, hair has significant social and cultural implications, particularly for those whose hair styles do not adhere to socially constructed perceptions of beauty. Black Hair is often an additional point of interest for those holding an anti-Black ideology as it can be weaponized as a tool to further put-down and oppress Black girls. While young girls are exposed to numerous hair styles, they are often socialized to delineate between "good hair" and "bad hair."

Good hair is viewed through Eurocentric portrayals of beauty that often depict White girls with long straight hair and fair skin as the epitome of femininity (Gordon 2008). Thus, good hair is perceived to be attractive, accepted, and a sign of social status (Robinson 2011). These normative archetypes simultaneously juxtapose White girls as beautiful and Black girls as unattractive. For years, these views have been expressed throughout popular children's movies, shows, and merchandise (Brady and Abawi 2019). While this pattern has begun to change in recent years with increasing diversity in the Disney princess franchise (now including princess Tiana) (Moffitt and Harris 2014) and natural hair styles worn by leading Black female politicians (e.g., Ayanna Pressley, Stacey Abrams) (Branigin 2018), the maintenance of the Eurocentric beauty paradigms for hair remains.

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In contrast, bad hair is perceived to be unattractive, not accepted, and a sign of lowly status (Robinson 2011). Black hair has been described as “kinky” or “nappy” to refer to hair that is naturally coiled in texture. However, while African Americans have used these terms as empowering ways to describe Black hair, they are situated within a negative historical context. Specifically, Eurocentric perceptions of Black hair have framed dark coiled hair as bad and ugly. Therefore, these terms also carry with them strong derogatory connotations (Banks 2000).

Given that many young Black girls learn societal standards for good hair is straight, non-Black, and smooth in texture, there is often social pressure to conform to these standards. As noted by Banks (2000), “Hair matters in black communities, and it matters in different ways for women and men. For black women in this society, what is considered desirable and undesirable hair is based on one’s hair texture” (p. 2). According to Oyedemi (2016), the juxtaposition of natural Black hair in comparison to Eurocentric beauty standards is a form of violence. Moreover, in an attempt to adhere to normative ideals, some Black women will engage in processes to texture and shape their hair in accordance with European and Asian textural standards. Oyedemi (2016) argued this process is also violent: “This violence has become internalized and generational... the process of attaining ‘beautiful’ hair is enmeshed with all forms of violence: physical, direct, structural, cultural and symbolic” (p. 2). Guided by this perspective, we sought to undercover this process manifests among Black girls, as informed by narratives from their parents.

Purpose and Guiding Questions

Informed by this context, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of Black girls as conveyed through the narratives of their parents. In particular, this study was part of a larger study focused on racial microaggressions in early childhood education (preschool through third grade). The study employed narratives written by parents of Black children, many of whom shared the ways they and their children were microaggressed by educators due to their daughters’ hair. While discussions around Black hair were not limited to Black girls solely, the salience and depth of comments regarding issues revolving around Black girls’ hair was striking in comparison to their male peers.

Relevant Literature

A Brief Historical Overview on Black Hair

According to Randle (2015), a discussion on Black hair must begin in Africa prior to slavery... Before the era of

slavery, Black hair was regularly maintained with specialized oils and combs. Black hair was worn in a variety of styles, including twists, braids, and knots. However, in the 1600s, ships began bringing enslaved Africans to the Americas. Upon being captured and prior to boarding slave ships, slavers cut off the hair of enslaved Africans as an act to eliminate the visual aspects of one’s culture and to “break their spirit[s]” (Randle 2015, p. 116). This may have been particularly important because African hair styles were used to communicate one’s tribal affiliation, leadership role, social status, and the gods they worshipped (Sieber and Herreman 2000). Thus, hair connoted a sense of identity, respectability, and place in society, which slavers intentionally stripped from the enslaved.

In North America, enslaved Africans were often unable to maintain their general appearance or hair, given that they labored for long hours and did not have access to the oils or combs from Africa. Due to the brutal conditions of slavery, scalp conditions were commonplace and enslaved females ended up with noticeably matted and tangled hair. Many enslaved Africans were often made to wear scarves and handkerchiefs as headrags to hide their hair as instructed by their masters. Those enslaved, worked in closer proximity to Whites, were expected to wear wigs or to maintain their hair in braids, sometimes loosened with buttons and bacon grease and combed with harsh tools intended for wool (Byrd and Tharps 2014; Randle 2015).

During slavery, social and political hierarchies were evident among slave owners. Slave owners with greater wealth sought to purchase light-skinned slaves with more European-like features and hair. This perspective was an extension of already existent colorism among Whites, that prioritized White women who were of fairer skin and straighter hair. As noted by Kerr (2005), “Light skin was an indication of status for white communities long before light complexion became a mark of status in black communities” (p. 273). Moreover, lighter skinned and straighter haired African men and women were viewed as “fancy slaves” and were far more expensive on auction blocks. Slave masters often divided slaves by distinguishing characteristics to maintain control over the larger number of slaves than masters. This notion is embodied in the infamous Willie Lynch letter of 1712. This letter was actually a speech that was delivered by a West-Indian slave owner of the same name, which suggested that Whites Could maintain control of slaves by fostering envy and distrust among them. He described a “full proof method” of dividing the enslaved among one another by differences such as color, size, sex, attitude, and hair texture (e.g., fine hair, coarse hair). Lynch argued for intentional “crossbreeding” of enslaved people to ensure distinctions among them could be used to pit them against one another (The Final Call 2009).

Given this, skin tone and hair texture can be viewed as invariably linked demarcations of beauty imposed on Africans by slave masters (Morrow 1973). Viewpoints about Black hair imbued during the era of slavery continued afterwards. Normative perspectives on what constituted “good” and “bad” hair had already been deeply socialized and continued to demarcate those of higher social status. In the early 1900s, these views were further reinforced by Madam C. J. Walker, who built a massive business based on hair softening products (Randle 2015; Thompson 2009).

Hair has also served as a political tool in the Black community. In negation of Eurocentric hair standards, many members of the Black power movement of the 1960s and 1970s wore Afros as a mark of Black solidarity. However, during the following decades, Black women were regularly penalized in the workplace when their hair did not appeal to Eurocentric standards of beauty (e.g., color, texture, style; O’Brien-Richardson 2019). In fact, it was not until recently that California became the first state in the nation to ban discrimination on natural hairstyles (i.e., Black hair). In 2019, the state passed a law that provided protection to hairstyles such as “afros, braids, twists, and locks” (Chavez and Karimi 2019, para. 2). Thus, differential treatment of Black women based on hair still continues to this day.

Early childhood education is a time of formative development, where children are exploring their world and negotiating their place in it. During this time, children are in need of environments and interactions that are emotionally and physically safe; these are essential components to healthy cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development (Bowlby 1982; White 2013). Building an environment that fosters self-love for Black children requires proactive steps to develop an appreciation for their likeliness (e.g., image, representation). In particular, Black children must learn to view their physical attributes as beautiful and esteemed. This is seen as a path for countering more dominant, Eurocentric narratives that suggest otherwise (Coard et al. 2001; Suizzo et al. 2008).

This is one reason why Black children’s authors have increasingly focused on affirming Black girls’ skin color and hair (Brooks and McNair 2015). Moreover, this point is further reinforced in affirmation statements designed to be repeated by Black girls to build their self-esteem. These statements often involve a set of phrases that are executed through a call and response strategy, where the teacher, mentor, or counselor says a phrase and then student’s follow-up with a verbal response. Overall, such statements are designed to foster a positive regard for oneself and one’s community. Such statements almost invariably mention hair; for example, “I love all my kinks and curls in my hair” (10 morning affirmations for Black girls 2016, para. 5); “I love myself, I love my eyes, I love my hair, I love my beautiful brown skin, I love my nose, I am capable of doing great

things, I am intelligent, I am smart, I am loved” (Angele, 2014, para. 5); and “Your hair is the perfect halo for your head. It’s stunning and strong and soft at the same time, just like you” (Harris 2015, para. 15).

Brooks and McNair (2015) reviewed African American children’s literature to identify the ways Black girls’ hair was discussed. They included books that featured Black female lead characters also written by Black female authors. Their research identified three primary themes. First, they noted all books emphasized a universalist stance on hair, suggesting all hair (including Black hair and all types of Black hair) was good hair. Second, they noted hair was used as a conversational tool to discuss Black history. For example, one book addressed a discussion between a Black girl and her great grandmother, where she was told cornrows (hair braided close to one’s scalp) were given this name by Blacks from the old south due to their similarity to rows in cornfields. In other texts, similar conversations transitioned to a wider discussion of enslavement labor in other types of fields (e.g., cotton, tobacco). As with discussions of cornrows, natural hair worn in an afro hairstyle was used to discuss histories of resistance and Black pride in the face of racism. Third, they also found these works highlighted the bonding that takes place between Black girls and women when undoing or doing one’s hair. These messages demonstrated the intimacy and bond built during moments characterized by both vulnerability and power. Beyond children’s books, Black girls also receive messages on Eurocentric normative standards from their school settings as well.

School settings serve as prime sites for socializing young children. Children learn from interactions with one another, educators, and the environment around them. From these interactions, key messages about social status and power dynamics are inculcated in young minds. When informed by biased perspectives, these messages may serve to draw down (e.g., bring down, lower, degrade) Black children, affecting their self-esteem, self-confidence, and belief in the utility of school (Evans-Winters 2005; Morris 2016). Unfortunately, prior research has found messages regarding Black hair are communicated to Black girls in school. Based on interviews and focus groups with thirty-seven adolescent girls of African descent, O’Brien-Richardson (2019) found that Black girls are too often the recipients of hair harassment. Hair harassment refers to the “direct or indirect unwanted, unwelcomed, and offensive behavior made either explicitly or implicitly, typically toward women or girls of African descent, based on the texture, look, or subjective assumptions of their hair” (O’Brien-Richardson 2019, p. 523). She identified two different types of hair harassment, direct harassment (physical, verbal) and indirect (nonverbal) harassment. Girls discussed numerous types of harassment, including being made fun of and people physically touching their hair without approval. This resulted in social

rejection and exclusion that had an effect on their self-image and sense of emotional safety in school settings. However, such perceptions of Black hair did not begin in the current era but are a vestige of the mistreatment of Black peoples from chattel slavery.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) served to inform the theoretical underpinnings of this study. The CRT framework was first created as a tool for understanding and addressing how marginalization manifests in reference to Black peoples, though the framework has since expanded to include people of color, those who are low-income, women, individuals with disabilities, and other minoritized populations (Gillborn et al. 2018; Howard and Navarro 2016). CRT emerges from Critical Legal Studies, a movement in the legal research literature to delineate how the American legal system was used against Black people to subjugate them and to extend the dominant White power structure. The movement was also informed by a criticism from scholars that the field of legal studies had not led to social transformation. CRT extended this critique in legal studies however, the framework is widely used across disciplines, particularly in the field of education (Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

There are five tenets of CRT, as espoused by Solórzano (1998). The first tenet is a centralized view on race and racism, with an explicit focus and targeting of race in the analysis. The analysis is also attentive to how race interacts with other forms of subordination (e.g., gender, age, sexual orientation, religious status). The second tenet is that CRT specifically challenges dominant assumptions, perspectives, stereotypes, and sense-making. In addition, the third tenet is that CRT assumes a commitment to racial justice specifically and social justice overall. Given that the voices and experiences of minoritized communities are often decentered in historical and contemporary research, the fourth tenet is centering the knowledges, experiences, and realities of people of color as ‘real’ and valid. Lastly, CRT employs a transdisciplinary perspective that is grounded in numerous fields and academic disciplines.

Informed by these five tenets, CRT scholars have often spent time documenting, articulating, and defining (e.g., naming, categorizing) the subjugated realities of people of color. This knowledge that emanates from these efforts can serve as a source of empowerment to challenge, educate, and address racist power structures. One outgrowth of this has been exploration into the subtle ways that racism manifests in everyday life and in unconscious ways. This has directly informed the work of scholars on racial microaggressions (Yosso et al. 2009; Solórzano et al. 2000), a concept described in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by the concepts of racial and gender microaggressions. The term *microaggressions* was first coined by Chester Pierce in the 1970s to describe the subtle and often-unconscious ways racism is perpetuated in society. Since then, the term microaggressions has been expanded to refer more broadly to messages communicated by dominant groups to minoritized groups (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability status; DeAngelis 2009; Harwood et al. 2012; Nadal et al. 2010; Torres-Harding et al. 2012). In the context of this study, the researchers were most attentive to the broader work on racial and gender microaggressions as espoused by Sue (2010).

According to Sue (2010), microaggressions refer to the ways women and people of color are insulted and invalidated in society simply due to their racial heritage and sex. Sue et al. (2007) defined racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). Similar to racial microaggressions, gender microaggressions focus on indirect sexism and stereotypes about women as exhibited through verbal and nonverbal behavior that demeans and lowers expectations for women. Both forms of microaggressions can be conveyed through a variety of mechanisms (e.g., verbal, nonverbal) and are often perpetuated unconsciously (Sue 2010).

Microaggressions are often typified by the message consciously rendered and the unintended message. For example, a White person may say to a person of color, “Wow, you are so articulate,” but the underlying message is the presumption that the recipient of the message would not be articulate. Similarly, during a meeting with a number of individuals, a man might ask a woman to take notes instead of asking another man. The underlying communication is an assumption women should serve in secretarial roles (Sue et al. 2007). Given the pervasiveness and regularity of these messages, they have harmful effects on the recipients of these messages (Sue and Constantine 2007). Specifically, Sue (2010) found microaggressions can result in elevated anxiety, lowered self-efficacy, limited attentional focus, reduced confidence and drive, and overall feelings of worthlessness. There are numerous subtypes of racial and gender microaggressions. These subtypes describe the unique ways messages negatively characterize and communicate racist and sexist ideologies. For example, one subtype of racial and gender microaggressions is second-class citizenship, where women and people of color are ignored, given less attention, or treated as

lesser than due to their racial and gender identity. Another subtype is pathologizing culture, where messages communicated to women and people of color connote their values, communication styles, and culture are less ideal (Sue 2010).

Research Design

This study employed critical race counter storytelling to illuminate Black children's parents' perspectives of how their children experienced microaggressions regarding their hair in early childhood education. Critical race counter storytelling is a methodological tool for revealing the experiences of minoritized populations by elevating often-untold stories they experience (Harper 2009). These stories are viewed as "counter" in that they represent perspectives and viewpoints often not represented in the extant research literature. Too often, these counter narratives are overshadowed by master narratives that do not attend to the realities of minoritized communities. Moreover, master narratives too often gloss over the racialized educational realities of people of color who navigate oppressional systems of education that were not designed for them (Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

As noted by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), there are several types of counter storytelling approaches, including: (a) personal narratives that describe an individual's personal experiences with issues of race and racism in society; (b) other peoples' narratives that illuminate the perspectives, experiences, and realities of minoritized communities; and (c) composite narratives that represent a synthesized version of themes across multiple stories. In this particular study, other peoples' narratives were employed as a primary tool for examining the racialized experiences of Black girls in early childhood education. The intention of sharing these narratives is to develop a framework for educators, families, and children to learn from the counter perspectives of people of color engaged in navigating the educational pipeline for underserved students of color in early childhood education (Valencia and Solórzano 1997).

As informed by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), researchers who employ a critical race paradigm focus on four primary sources of knowledge production: (a) researchers' own experiential knowledge, (b) research expertise of the researcher, (c) data collected throughout the study, and (d) narratives derived from participants. This study was derived from a larger study of 106 parents of Black children, 44 of whom were parents of Black/African American girls in early childhood education. These 44 parents were asked to share their perspectives on their experiences and perceptions of how Black girls were engaged in early learning, with particular regard to their hair.

Data Collection

This study employed convenience sampling by identifying parents of Black children using marketing on social media. Specifically, this involved advertisements on Facebook that uses keywords to identify individuals who identified as Black or African American and as being parents. Facebook then targets their users for these advertisements based on prior searches, engagement of social posts (e.g., likes, shares), and the interests of the user's friends (Facebook n.d.). The advertisement shows up in the feedback to users who were then able to click on the to learn more. There were also organic posts that were displayed through the researchers' accounts. Upon clicking on the link, prospective participants were redirected to a survey landing page in Qualtrics where they were provided with information on informed consent and an overview of the study to determine their interest in contributing to the research project. This overview included general inclusion criteria (e.g., being a parent of a Black child, being at least 18 years of age) as well as noting this study's focus on early childhood education (e.g., preschool through third- grade). Those who indicated interest were provided with definitions and examples of microaggressions informed by Sue's (2010) articulation and taxonomy of microaggression subtypes. Participants were then asked to offer counter narratives that described their children's experiences, if any. These counter narratives are elicited to focus on the experiential knowledges and perspectives of Black children, a notion derived from CRT's fourth tenet on experiential knowledge. Participants were prompted to offer relevant instances and were asked to provide all relevant and contextual details. Participants then wrote up five separate descriptions of events, ranging in length depending on the degree of detailed need to convey what had occurred. The overwhelming majority of participants wrote at least three in-depth descriptions of events.

An overview of the larger sample is depicted in Table 1. Based on this chart, it is evident the vast majority, but not all, of the parents of Black children who participated in this study were African American (84.8%) or Black (e.g., West Indian, Somali, West African; 7.6%). Many of the respondents were also women (81.8%), which is likely a function of the fact the recruitment information for this study was shared by advocacy organizations for Black mothers. Beyond this, the majority of the target population had more than one reference child (i.e., two children or more; 52%), though the highest percentage of respondents (48%) had one child. The highest percentage of respondents were from the Northeast, at 41.5%, with the smallest percentage from the South (only 1.9%).

Data in this study were coded using a grounded theory approach, as articulated by Charmaz (2006). The

Table 1 Respondent demographics

Characteristic	Subgroup	Percentage (%)
Age	18 to 24	12.6
	25 to 29	18.4
	30 to 34	32.0
	35 to 39	25.2
	40 to 45	6.8
	46 and older	4.9
Race	African American	84.8
	Other Black	7.6
	Non-Black	7.6
Gender	Male	18.2
	Female	81.8
Children	One child	48.0
	Two children	28.8
	Three children	17.3
	Four children or more	5.7
Region	Midwest	25.5
	Northeast	41.5
	West	25.5
	South	1.9
	Overseas	5.7

researchers employed a three-stage coding process, involving open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding involved reviewing the parents' narratives of Black children to identify emergent ideas, concepts, and themes. Axial coding involved the researchers grouping the emergent ideas into relevant themes and constructs. This was done to identify emergent ideas without attribution to a specific framework and then in subsequent rounds (different times) as informed by Sue's (2010) taxonomy of microaggression subtypes. Finally, selective coding involved reviewing and reconceptualizing themes to identify the most salient notions. While a wide array of microaggression subtypes (e.g., assumptions of criminality, colorblindness, denial of individual racism) were identified in the larger study, this study focuses on the microaggressions that emerged specifically in relationship to hair.

Several procedures were employed to aid in the trustworthiness of this study. First, this study employed bracketing, an approach where the researchers sought to "bracket" or separate their own personal experiences when analyzing the data (Ahern 1999). This involved the researchers journaling about their own experiences with microaggressions in school and that of their own children. In addition, the researchers also employed intercoder reliability strategies to enhance the congruency of the coding. Specifically, the researchers coded sections of the data separately and then conferred with one another in an iterative process throughout the data analysis phase of this study (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Finally, the

researchers employed member checks by presenting the data to three town halls of parents of Black children to elicit their feedback on the themes and to ensure what was presented was an accurate portrayal of their experiences and the experiences of their children.

Limitations

As with all research, this study was not without limitations. As noted previously, the highest percentage of respondents were from the Northeast, at 41.5%, but the smallest were from the South, at only 1.9%. The lack of representation from the South is a limitation of this study; nevertheless, this study was focused on the specificity of the experiences and not generalizability to a larger population. Another limitation of this study was all demographic information collected was on parent respondents and did not include information on the educators from whom the vast majority of microaggressions described in this study were derived. That being said, many of the parents described the teachers in their narratives, and, when this occurred, teachers were most often described as being White. Given that the vast majority of teachers in the nation are White, this attribution seems logical. Beyond this, this study focused on the voices of the parents of Black children and not their teachers. As a result, there is no contextual information on the teachers' prior experiences with diverse students, their preparation to teach diverse populations, or knowledge of available resources to do so.

Findings

The findings from this study demonstrated two primary ways Black girls were microaggressed for their hair. These themes included second-class hair and a presumption of defilement. It should be noted both forms of microaggressions align with Sue et al.'s (2007) description of microinsults. As noted previously, microinsults refer to messages communicated to people of color that insult them by putting them down (i.e., subtle snubs). Given this, Black girls were found to be the recipients of insults about their hair color, texture, and styles, especially when their hair was dark, coily, or natural. In this section, these types of microaggressions are described in detail, along with associated quotes from parents of Black children and contextual insights derived from the analytic process. An additional minor theme not included in this section was an assumption of criminality. An assumption of criminality occurs when people of color are assumed to be dangerous, deviant, and troublemakers due to their race (Sue et al. 2007). In several cases, Black girls were reprimanded for

the beads in their hair clacking, or they were assumed to be distractions to the rest of the class, for hairstyles perceived as unkempt. However, given that this theme was not as recurrent or salient, the prior two themes are discussed in detail.

Second-Class Hair

The first theme derived from parents of Black children was the pervasive assumption that Black girls' hair was perceived as lesser than by peers and educators alike. This notion is associated with Sue et al.'s (2007) description of second-class citizenship, referring to instances when White people are viewed as preferential or more worthwhile than people of color. In Sue's work, the concept of a second-class citizen is framed within the context of a customer service relationship, where people of color are often looked over and treated as less important than White people. The application of second-class citizenship here differs from this notion, in that it is the physical and cultural attributes of Black children being treated as lesser, than rather than their status as customers. Given this, we perceive second-class hair as a subtype of second-class citizenship, devoid of a customer service context, but still perceived as having limited worth.

Overall, parents reported that teachers and students extended negative comments about Black hair. This appeared to be most common whenever hair was worn naturally. Natural hair was critiqued when worn in an afro hairstyle, when hair was braided, in ponytails or large twists, or perceived as being kinky. This is juxtaposed with hair that may be less coiled and/or permed. In fact, one parent described an interaction with a teacher where the teacher suggested her daughter's hair "would look nicer" if the parent "just permed it like the other Blacks." Moreover, some Black children of mixed-race parentage were lauded for having good hair, remarks their parents vehemently rejected.

Overall, the comments demonstrated that teachers perceived natural hair as nonstandard, unbeautiful, and not well-maintained. For example, sharing an experience her daughter had in second grade, one parent stated, "Well, the teacher one day said my child hair was[n't] kept because it wasn't in braids or a ponytail. See my child was wearing her afro, my child doesn't need braids or a ponytail." Another parent remarked about a similar instance, stating the teacher "made a comment about her kinky coily hair. She said, 'Oh wow, she has her hair done today,' when her hair is done every day." This incident took place at a parent-teacher conference.

Other participants regularly remarked how educators made comments to suggest their child's hair was unkempt, a connotation they received as questioning their parental abilities. For instance, one parent stated:

When my daughter was in preschool, she had a teacher constantly trying to "fix" her hair. There were days we would wash it, blow it out (similar to an Afro), and put a bow in because she LOVED her hair that way. She felt it made her look more like mommy. But I noticed that every single time she wore her hair that way, she would come home with it like she had pulled and twisted at it all day. I figure she was just playing hard and it was just the way of the day. One day, my aunt picked her up early and noticed her hair was in some weird style I would never do with rubber bands and random barrettes. Her hair was very fragile and still growing so we choose protective styles or an Afro. She sent me a picture and jokingly asked me why I would do that to her hair. I explained that I hadn't and drove right up to the school to have a meeting with the director of the preschool. The director was immediately defensive and told me that if I would care more about my daughter's hair, her teachers wouldn't need to do it for me. Livid doesn't even begin to describe my feelings in that meeting. But it doesn't just end there. After educating these nitwits on natural hair, they STILL felt I was being negligent and STILL defended their actions.

As was made evident from this parent, the action taken by teachers to put rubber bands and barrettes in her daughter's hair was received offensively, especially because of the perception letting a child wear an Afro was seen as negligent.

As noted, normative assumptions about hairstyles were also communicated to Black children by their peers. These messages were sometimes communicated in a manner meant to deride their fellow classmates. For example, one parent offered the following:

My daughter started kindergarten at Eleanor Elementary and her first week of school the students continued to make fun of her hair because it was in two puff balls. She was so hurt by the comments made to her by her classmates that she didn't want to wear her hair in two puff balls anymore. I told the principal about what happened and she changed the conversation to Black people need more than one month of history.

While there were certainly cases where students were teased, as in the aforementioned example, or actions were taken that demonstrated a perceived second-class status (e.g., redoing a child's hairstyle), in most cases, second-class hair was communicated verbally in a matter-of-fact manner. This message was discussed as a point of view, sometimes without an expressed intent to put down the recipient. This notion aligns with prior articulations of microaggressions as messages that can be rendered unconsciously toward people of color. Despite the potential some of the messages rendered

were not done so consciously, the negative influence of these messages on the recipients remains. Clearly, the messages communicated could have a harmful effect on Black girls' identity and identity development.

Presumption of Defilement

The second theme that emerged was a presumption of defilement. This microaggression refers to communication, either verbal or nonverbal, rendered to Black people that suggests they are generally debased, physically dirty, infected, or diseased (Wood 2019). In this study, these perceptions were extended to viewpoints of Black girls' hair that were communicated to them by students and teachers alike. This notion goes beyond general pathologies of Black hair as being less than or a second-class physical attribute but focuses on a qualitative interpretation of Black girls' hair as being generally defiled. Messages regarding a presumption of defilement came from educators and students alike. The comments ranged from more subtle put downs to more direct insults about cleanliness. However, the most pervasive connotation was that Black girls' hair was inherently dirty. For example, one parent stated the following:

My daughter came home and said that a little White boy had teased her about her hair. She had her hair in braids with a bun and had just put some fresh oil on them. He said to her, "Why is your hair so dirty?" It hurt her feelings. She said, "My hair isn't dirty" and he said, "Yes, it is, I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true." She says that he is ALWAYS mean to her.

While Black girl's hair was generally framed as dirty, some parents provided more extreme examples of how Black hair was perceived in this manner. A summative example was offered by the parent of a kindergartner who described the following interaction with her child's school:

My daughter was in kindergarten. To save time and argument each day, I put her hair into Marley braids. Because she obviously wore the same hair style for a couple weeks at a time, the teacher decided she needed to be referred to the nurse's office to be checked for lice. This became a recurring event, and when I asked if these checks were a regular thing for all kids, the answer was no. The nurse, unaware of the dry scalp my daughter has, repeatedly sent my daughter home claiming she had nits in her hair so she must have lice. I finally had to go to the doctor with my daughter for an exam by the pediatrician to determine she did not in fact have lice. The missed days for nonexistent lice had an impact on my daughter's attendance.

As evidenced by this quote, the presumption of defilement included perceptions some Black girls' hair was infested. In

this case, the child was repeatedly referred for lice testing despite this not being a policy for all children nor a reported instance where the child actually had lice.

In addition, Black parents perceived school educators' (e.g., teachers, counselors, administrators, aides) responses to teasing of Black girls about their hair being dirty was seldom satisfactory. Rather, parents perceived teachers were passive in response to concerns about teasing. A number of parents expressed similar comments when Black hair was framed in a defiled manner. These parents noted their comments were ignored, glossed over, or that they "told the teachers but they didn't really do anything." As an example, one parent commented:

My daughter was in kindergarten at a parochial school and she wore cornrows with beads. A couple of her White classmates let their moms know they wanted to wear their hair like that. The girls came to school and told my daughter they wouldn't wear their hair like that because it's not clean. That's what their moms, one of whom was a language and religion teacher at the school, told them. When I spoke to the teacher, she said her daughter misunderstood.

An essential perceptible inherent in this quote was the parent perceived the school was dismissive of expressed concerns. Specifically, she noted the teacher did not address the comments said to her daughter, dismissing them as a misunderstanding. This notion of having concerns about Black mistreatment being dismissed or ignored was apparent across this theme of a presumption of defilement.

Discussion

This study has illuminated insights on the experiences and perceptions of Black girls in early childhood education. Through the lens of racial and gender microaggressions, this research has shown patterns that serve to shape Black girls' perceptions of hair and their identities as Black girls in society. Ultimately, this study has shown Black hair was viewed as a marker of second-class citizenship and as an indicator of defilement. The perpetrators of these microaggressions ranged from educators to other children in the classroom. From the perspective of CRT, this study has illuminated the experiential realities of Black girls, providing a space for their experiences to be conveyed through the narratives of their parents.

Negative messages about Black hair are particularly concerning in early childhood education, especially given the important role early learning has on children's formative development. Ample research demonstrates children are in need of environments that are emotionally safe for positive prosocial and identity development (Bowlby 1982;

White 2013). In contrast, this study has shown this may not always be the case for young Black girls. Instead, their hair is employed as a signifier of second-class status and defilement.

With respect to second-class status, one key finding from this study was that Black girls were the recipients of messages from educators, suggesting their hair was less preferential. In particular, some Black girls received messages in early childhood education that Black hair was not viewed as beautiful compared to White hair. This notion was made even more salient when their hair was presented in a natural hair style. Such messages are in alignment with prior research that has shown that good hair is often viewed through Eurocentric standards of femininity (Gordon 2008; Robinson 2011).

Having experiences that convey being less than align with Sue et al.'s (2007) concept of second-class citizenship. However, this concept focuses primarily on messages based on one's culture. In this case, second-class status was a function of culture as embodied by a child's physical characteristics, specifically their hair and hair styles. Negative messages about Black hair were communicated with a mixture of intent. In some cases, the perpetrator of the message conveyed an intent received by the recipients and their parents as purposely negative. In other cases, the negative message was viewed as being conveyed unintentionally and unconsciously. This aligns with Sue's (2010) articulation of microaggressions as being communicated, in many cases, as unintentional messages. However, as Sue noted, regardless of intent, the messages can have a negative influence on the recipient. In the case of messages rendered in this study, it seems they had a negative influence on both the target (i.e., the Black girl who was the recipient of the message) and the unintended target (i.e., the parent or caretaker) of the recipient.

As noted, while negative perceptions of Black hair were endemic to the experiences of Black girls, this notion was heightened when the hair was worn in a natural style (e.g., Afro, ponytails, twists). This experience directly aligns with messages rendered to Black women during the time of slavery, that regularly conveyed that their hair was unpresentable to the point where it was better to be covered up (i.e., with wigs and rags), rather than worn naturally (Byrd and Tharps 2014). Messages regarding Black hair were also reinforced when Black girls' hair aligned more closely with European standards (e.g., permed, less coiled, softer texture). This practice of extolling certain types of Black hair while vilifying other types of Black hair is akin to Lynch's (1712) practice of dividing Black people by attributes such as hair (e.g., coarse hair, fine hair). This practice is most clearly evident in the aforementioned experiences of some mixed-race Black girls who were credited for their good hair. As noted, these compliments were starkly rejected by their parents as

offensive. It was also notable that some parents reported instances where teachers redid their children's hair (e.g., re-combing, rubber bands). This notion symbolically mirrors the violence that Black slaves experienced when their choice of maintaining their hair in ways that expressed their own identities was negated.

Another key finding from this study was Black hair was perceived through a lens of defilement. Specifically, Black hair was perceived to be generally debased, physically dirty, infected, or diseased. In some cases, children were assumed to have scalp conditions and infestations simple due to wearing natural hair. The perception that Black hair is dirty and defiled may be a vestige of the mistreatment received by Black people during the era of slavery. As noted previously, during slavery, Black hair was often unable to be maintained due to the harsh conditions experienced by Black people. The lack of care for their general wellbeing certainly meant their hair could not be adequately maintained; this resulted in hair damage and scalp conditions (Randle 2015). While the authors of this study cannot make a direct linkage between these issues and the presumption of defilement identified in this study, it is certainly logical the defiled view of Black hair in the Eurocentric psyche began during the era of slavery and has been continuously reinforced and perpetuated in schooling contexts since then.

The treatment Black girls received regarding their hair aligns with O'Brien-Richardson's (2019) articulation of hair harassment, where children are subject to unwelcomed and offensive messages due to their hair. In this study, instances of both direct harassment (verbal) and indirect harassment (nonverbal) were evident in the messages received by Black children. While negative messages about Black hair were enforced by what was said to Black children by educators and other children, these messages were further reinforced by a lack of response to teasing. Specifically, many parents mentioned their lack of contentment with educators' responses to teasing and bullying from other children about hair. When Black girls were teased for their hair, educators rarely gave messages or implemented actions viewed by parents as appropriate responses. Thus, inaction was a further mechanism for the pervasive ways societal norms about Black hair were communicated to Black girls. As noted earlier in this study, slavers would cut off the hair of enslaved Africans as an act designed to break their spirits (Randle 2015). The parallels between this act and the harassment Black girls received are certainly evident in their intention to "break" their spirits.

The comments from parents of Black children serve to illuminate the ways Black girls are socialized to perceive their identities through the lens of their hair. While educators were certainly central communicators of negative messages about Black hair, parents also mentioned other children made fun of their children for their hairstyles. This teasing

serves to inform Black girls, from an early age, about the perspectives others hold about their hair. Of course, regardless of whether the messages came from educators or other children, these constructions are informed by Eurocentric stands of beauty. These messages serve to frame ways Black girls are engaged by their peers and may have an effect on the development of a positive self-regard and Black affinity early on.

In some cases, educators responded to parents in ways that inferred the Black girls themselves were actually to blame. This notion has been written about in prior research from Wood (2019) as reverse causality, or referring to instances when Black children are “questioned and interrogated by educators after they report being mistreated because it is assumed they perpetrated some action to cause the event (e.g., reverse causality)” (p. 82). The only difference however, was the students themselves were not blamed, but rather the source of this dismissive response was based on a pathologizing of culture (i.e., seeing one’s culture as problematic and less than).

This study focused on messages rendered to Black girls, as reported by their parents. However, it was also clear the messages rendered to Black girls also had an effect on their parents and caretakers. Specifically, an underlying message communicated to them was that they did not take care of their children. In essence, their children’s hair was a proxy measure for their ineffectiveness and inadequacy as a parent. While this was a general notion, this message was even more heightened when Black hair was worn naturally.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on findings from this study, several recommendations are offered to improve the experiential realities of Black girls with respect to how they are treated due to their hair in early childhood education. It should be noted these recommendations are rooted in the notion early childhood serves as a foundational learning opportunity for children that can influence students throughout the educational pipeline. The recommendations offered here may seem like basic principles of practice that would not need specification; however, given the experiences expressed by parents of Black children, it is necessary to recommend what may seem obvious. We offer the acronym HAIR as a strategy for remembering these practices, representing the words Hone, Affirm, Intervene, and Refrain.

The first recommendation is to “Hone” their understanding of Black hair by learning what symptoms of dry scalp look like. This recommendation is based on the notion that some educators viewed Black girls’ hair through an assumption of defilement, where their hair was perceived to be dirty and infested. In some of these instances, dry

scalp was incorrectly assumed to be lice. For an individual uneducated in Black hair, the conditions may present similar conditions (e.g., a child having white flakes drop from their hair, head scratching). However, a trained eye would easily discern the difference between dry scalp and lice infestation.

The second recommendation is for educators to “affirm” the beauty of Black hair, as they would affirm positive attributes about all other children in their classrooms. Given the ubiquitous social perceptions of Black hair that are negative, it is necessary for educators to affirm the beauty of Black hair as a counter-messaging effort. As shown in this study, Black hairstyles were most often viewed as less than when worn in natural style. Thus, it may be even more important for educators to do so when this occurs. Another option is for educators to simply abstain from making negative comments or to avoid commenting at all about hairstyles. For some, this option may be the most sensible; however, this approach does not address the pervasive negative messages Black girls receive about their hair from educators, parents, and students alike.

In addition to the aforementioned suggestions, the third recommendation is to “Intervene” when Black girls are being teased for their hair. More specifically, it is suggested that educators be proactive in addressing stereotypes and negative messages said to Black children about their hair. This study has illuminated a number of different microaggressions received by Black girls in early learning about their hair. Moreover, parents in this study noted, that when these issues were raised to educators, they were either dismissed or no action was taken. Given this, educators should consider negative messaging about hair to be hair harassment, or bullying, and should respond to these issues with an appropriate level of intervention and consequence for perpetrators of these messages.

Finally, it is recommended that educators avoid touching, manipulating, or altogether redoing the hair of Black children. More simply, they should “refrain” from touching the hair of Black girls. In this study, parents described instances where their children’s hair was redone to adhere to teachers’ preferred styles. As demonstrated by the parent narratives, this was perceived as offensive and hurtful. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that educators (e.g., teachers, counselors, administrators) not redo hair unless given a specific directive by the parent to do so. One caveat to this recommendation would be the rare instance in which a child has a hair accessory, such as a barrette, bead, or ball ponytail holder, that falls out; it would seem logical to put this back in as to avoid the child’s hair becoming rapidly undone.

In addition to these recommendations, we suggest that future research should explore how Black hair is framed and engaged in early learning. As noted earlier, this study had a limited sample from the Southern states. Therefore, we recommend future studies examine the degree regional

differences in treatment exist, if any. However, more importantly, scholars should conduct future studies that elicit demographic data on teachers who are rendering microaggressions to students. This may help illuminate how patterns of microaggressive language and actions are different between and within groups. Beyond this, future research can also employ the narratives of both Black children and their teachers to see where commonalities exist, how differences in perspective are conveyed, and what the teacher perceives as their experience with the student and their parent(s).

Altogether, this study has provided unique insight into the experiences and perceptions of Black girls, as conveyed through the narratives of their parents in early learning context. This study has shown microaggressions are evident in the experiences of some Black girls as it relates to their hair and hair styles. The researchers hope the findings from this study may illuminate differential treatment and practices that can lead to more healthy experiences for Black girls in early learning.

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