Moving Towards the Light: Navigating Global Challenges Through Early Childhood Education and Care Values

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Abstract

In 1963, African American author and activist James Baldwin warned about the dangerous times we were living through, in reference to the ongoing racial injustice in the United States (U.S.). His words are just as poignant today as we navigate concurrent global challenges, some of which include climate change, racial injustice, and housing unaffordability. While education is incapable of solving all of these complex issues that require a systematic approach through governmental intervention and policies to sustain solutions, values inherent in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) can guide us as we face global challenges collectively, moving towards a more just and humane world for all. This paper is based on a narrative inquiry study that took place in the U.S. with six Black families enrolled in ECEC programs throughout the Bronx and Brooklyn, two boroughs in New York City, in 2024. Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were conducted to learn about the experiences young Black children and families were having in a variety of ECEC programs. Data was examined through the lenses of Critical Childhood Studies, Intersectionality, and Anti-Blackness, with the counter-storytelling tenet of Critical Race Theory serving as the overarching umbrella. Findings demonstrated that Black children and families resisted anti-Blackness and relentlessly pursued care, strong collaborations with educators, and basic needs that allowed for thriving childhoods. In this paper, I reexamine three findings through the lenses of ECEC values to demonstrate how they can provide guidance to navigate global challenges that will exacerbate in the future.
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Keywords

Early childhood education, early care, anti-Blackness, critical race theory, ethics of care

Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.

-Helen Keller

Introduction

In 1963, African American author and activist James Baldwin addressed a group of New York City public school teachers in what is now famously known as *A Talk to Teachers*. In his speech, Baldwin stated, “Let’s begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time” (p. 330). Baldwin’s comment was in reference to racial injustice and the ongoing fight for civil rights for Black people in the U.S. Through his speech, Baldwin urged teachers to prepare Black children for the world they were living in by helping them sustain and build their racial identity and self-worth, while also recognizing and speaking out against injustices.

Although Baldwin’s statement was expressed more than 60 years ago, it could easily be applied to the current moment with concurring global challenges, some of which include climate change, global displacement, gun violence, racial injustice, food insecurity, and housing unaffordability. This paper is based on a narrative inquiry study with six Black families who were located in the U.S. and

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enrolled in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs throughout the Bronx and Brooklyn, two boroughs in New York City, in 2024. I begin by defining values often learned in ECEC, followed by a brief overview of ECEC in the United States. Next, I share a description of the research study that informed the ECEC values that I focus on in this paper (Kirton, 2024), values expressed by Black children and families that hold the potential to help our society respond to global challenges. Finally, I share implications for incorporating ECEC values to navigate the growing global challenges we face as a society.

Values Learned in Early Childhood Education and Care

My identities as a Black woman, parent, and former preschool teacher inform my worldview. When I see someone hoarding resources or information, I wonder, "Did they attend preschool…and if so, what happened to the lessons they likely learned about sharing and being a part of a larger community?" Values that demonstrate the importance of respect, care, and community *should* be modeled and nurtured in ECEC. However, I recognize that every child is not able to learn these important lessons in ECEC due to the intersection of racism, sexism, classism, language, and/or ableism, and how aspects of an individual's identity affect their experiences. This is especially true for young Black children due to the phenomenon of anti-Blackness in schools (Bryan et al., 2024; Erwin et al., 2024; ross, 2021). However, Black children and families have historically resisted anti-Blackness, and that remains true today (Foster, 1997; Givens, 2023).

Young children's families, along with educators in ECEC, support children as they learn how to respect and care for themselves, the people in their community, and the valuable materials and environments that shape their world. This paper argues that ECEC values that center care, strengthen collaboration, and prioritize joy, peace, love, and security as essential to thriving (livelihoods), provide a critical framework for responding to concurring global challenges. Drawing on counter-storytelling in CRT, the narratives in this paper challenge dominant deficit perspectives and position marginalized communities as knowledge holders and leaders in imagining more just futures.

A Brief Overview of Early Childhood Education and Care in the United States

Early childhood education and care in the U.S. are represented by a wide variety of options for young children and families that include daycare (ages range from 6 weeks to 12-years-old depending on the program and location), pre-kindergarten, kindergarten (the period when children in the U.S. officially enter school at 5-years-old), Head Start programs, nursery schools, childcare programs, and family childcare (home based programs). Head Start is a free program that serves economically under-resourced families with children from birth to age 5 and pregnant women in urban and rural locations across all 50 states in the U.S. year-round (Headstart.gov).

In the U.S., there are options to attend free or tuition based preschool programs for children ages three to five before they enter kindergarten. There are half-day and full-day programs to help meet the needs of different families. Funding and delivery are equally varied. There are public and private options for delivery with funding that derives from federal, state, and local sources. This makes the foundation of ECEC precarious for educators and for the families in need of programs for their

young children (Peters et al., 2025). State and local agencies monitor conditions in childcare with standards and guidelines that vary. Preparation for teachers in childcare settings include safety trainings, clinical experiences, and formal education.

My study aimed to learn firsthand about the everyday experiences of young Black children and their families in early childhood programs across New York City, while providing a space for children to share their own stories. Young Black children are often denied the privileges of innocence and childhood due to adultification bias (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Iruka et al., 2020). My study recognized Black children exactly as they were in the moment when we met, not as they are often perceived by society - as older or more mature than they are.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study that this paper is based on was examined through the lenses of Anti-Blackness, Critical Childhood Studies, Intersectionality, and Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory is the primary framework utilized, while the other frameworks serve as supporting lenses throughout the manuscript. Anti-Blackness recognizes Blackness as outside of the consideration of humanity (Dumas, 2016). Anti-Blackness coupled with adultification bias helps to explain how Black children are often adultified and denied the affordances of childhood innocence (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Anti-Blackness is a global phenomenon that exists in society, including schools (Nxumalo, 2021; Beaman, 2020). Although New York City is diverse in terms of demographics, it is also true that New York City was ranked as the *most* segregated school system in the United States for Black students in 2018, a title that was also earned in previous years (Civil Rights Project, 2021). Therefore, I aimed to see how Black children and families were able to navigate school systems and programs despite the constant presence of anti-Blackness. I aimed to learn what Black children and families believed worked well in ECEC and what they wanted to see change.

Critical childhood theorists believe that children have ideas that should be heard, with thoughts that deserve consideration regardless of a child's age. Clark (2011) posits that children are agentic and therefore able to narrate their own stories, rather than have the adults around them tell stories on the child's behalf. Critical childhood studies emphasize the axis of childhood with scholars highlighting the marginalized position of children who hold less power in society and in schools (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). The young children in the study had much to say about their ECEC experiences, including how strong and supportive relationships with some of their teachers helped them feel safe, seen, and cared for, thus creating the conditions for them to thrive. Young Black children also shared ideas to strengthen the remaining ECEC values that were found in the study.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) derives from Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory and examines how the intersection of marginalized identities leads to further marginalization. Intersectionality states that individuals who are multiply marginalized have different experiences when compared to individuals who may have one aspect of their identity marginalized. For example, race is marginalized; however, gender is not, in the case of Black *men*. This is not true for Black *women*, however, who are marginalized by both race *and* gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Intersectionality allowed me to examine how different identity markers such as race, gender, class, dis/ability, and/or family structure,

impacted the types of experiences that Black children and families were having in early childhood and early care. I intentionally use the term dis/abilities (Annamma et al., 2012) to draw attention to the framing of ability as a social construct and to disrupt deficit perspectives that position disability as a limitation or a problem needing to be fixed.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) derives from critical legal studies yet remains distinctive in its own right. Critical race theorists assert that racism is embedded in our public policies and is foundational to the way society functions. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) note racism is not an anomaly which makes it hard to address and disrupt since it often remains unacknowledged, thus upholding the status quo and the racial hierarchy that assigns privilege to whiteness or an approximation to whiteness. One of the tenets of CRT is to illuminate the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. This tenet recognizes that Black, Indigenous, Latino, and Asian communities have unique histories and experiences tied to oppressive systems and, therefore, are especially equipped to share their own stories to assess and counter dominant narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) pointed out that one significant difference between CRT and some academic disciplines is an activist component that is central to CRT. A goal of CRT is "not only to understand our social situation but to change it, setting out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better" (p. 8). One aim of my study was to uplift the voices of multiply marginalized children and families who are not often given the space to share narratives about their lived experiences. These stories align with values found in ECEC and can inform the way we respond to the concurrent global challenges we face.

Black Children and Families in Schools and Early Care

There are numerous research studies that discuss the ways that Black children and their families are harmed in educational settings and devalued through school practices and policies that include harsh disciplinary practices (Dumas, 2014, 2016; Essien & Wood, 2021, 2022). These studies used a variety of methods—from ethnography to critical race counter-storytelling—to account for children's and families' perspectives as well as to name the conditions (e.g., zero tolerance policies and the misidentification of "problem children" versus "children with problems" [Freidus, 2020]) that put young Black children at risk.

The devaluation of Black children (and families) in early childhood education and early care has been well-documented (Boutte & Bryan, 2021; Essien, 2019; Essien & Wood, 2021). Black children and adults have been subjected to microaggressions and micro-insults, including assumptions about absent fathers, perceived notions about their socioeconomic status and school readiness, and disrespectful comments about the way Black children wear their natural hair.

Using modified grounded theory as their methodology, Essien and Wood (2023) included the voices of Black parents and children to provide critical race counter-storytelling to examine the experiences of young Black children dealing with microaggressions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors centered the narratives on families and some children in early childhood education, defined as preschool through third grade in the study. Findings suggested that Black children were overlooked in their virtual classroom, made to feel invisible, and often felt deflated and unmotivated to attend school online. Essien and Wood focused

more on the voices of the families for insight due to a concern that young children may find it difficult to articulate their perspectives on the experiences they encountered. One of the suggestions the authors made for future research was to speak with Black children at a later period to interview them retrospectively.

Intersectional Identities

Race and Gender

Everyone has intersecting identities; however, every identity is not perceived or treated the same way. Remaining true to the notion of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020), one would not typically perceive all Black males as multiply marginalized. While it is true that Black people are marginalized, Black cisgender and/or heterosexual males would not be considered marginalized in multiple ways since their gender and sexuality would be considered "normal." However, in the case of Black boyhood, the literature points to unique ways in which Black boys are adultified and seen through a lens of distrust in ways that problematize their identities as children. Further, Black boys' identities are comprised of being Black (race), male (gender), and childhood (age).

The intersection of race and gender indicates troubling outcomes for Black boys in early childhood education. Black boys are often viewed through the lens of stereotypes that perceive them as lazy, uninterested, or too energetic. In addition, Black boys are often seen as less competent despite their academic (cap)abilities, over-diagnosed for special education services, and made to face harsh disciplinary practices in ECEC that remove them from their learning settings (Beneke et al., 2021; Wright & Ford, 2019). Wright and Ford (2019) noted that while these outcomes are true for Black boys, generally speaking, they are especially true for Black boys growing up in large urban cities. The educational system provides "standards" and other guidelines for behavior that was normed on and developed for white children, which supports the notion that Black children are deviant, seen as a problem, and relegated to the category of "other," derived from notions of ableism (Love & Beneke, 2021).

Additional researchers have called attention to how Black children "are not faring well" in schools starting in early childhood settings due to the continuous presence of various forms of violence (including physical and symbolic) and anti-Black sentiments (Boutte & Bryan, 2021). More specifically, Boutte and Bryan discussed how the intersection of race and gender combine and lead to painful outcomes for young children and their families, with a focus primarily on Black boys. The authors illuminated their points by sharing personal narratives about treasured Black boys in their lives who, despite the love, care, and reassurance they received at home, continued to face harm and violence in school.

Research Questions:

1. What kinds of stories do Black children remember, retell, and share about their early childhood experiences? How do Black children tell their stories of early childhood education (preschool through 2nd grade)?

2. How do families with Black children negotiate the early childhood education process? What kinds of experiences and memories are salient for them?

Methodology

Design and Sample Selection

I employed a narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012) in this work with young Black children and their families (Clandinin et al., 2015; Houle, 2010). Narrative inquiry is both a way to interpret experience and "the study of experience as story" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012, p. 4). Drawing from a Deweyan theory of experience, narrative inquiry focuses on "the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin et al., 2015). This paper is based on a qualitative study conducted with six Black families ranging in ethnicity from Black Caribbean, Black and Native American, to Black African. The families attended early childhood programs in the Bronx and Brooklyn, two boroughs in New York City, in 2024.

The early childhood programs included Head Start, private (often tuition-based and privately funded), public (publicly funded), and a charter Montessori-influenced school. Charter schools are publicly funded and independently operated, while Montessori describes a learning approach that was developed more than 100 years ago by Italian physician and doctor, Dr. Maria Montessori. Some of the key considerations that distinguish a Montessori education are a focus on experiential learning, "care for self, others, and the environment" (American Montessori Society, n.d., para. 2), mixed-age classrooms, and ideals based on "equity, inclusion, and social justice" (ibid). The early childhood programs varied in their philosophical approach to education with some schools identifying as play based, traditional, progressive (child-centered and focused on experiential learning), and some that utilized a combination of approaches.

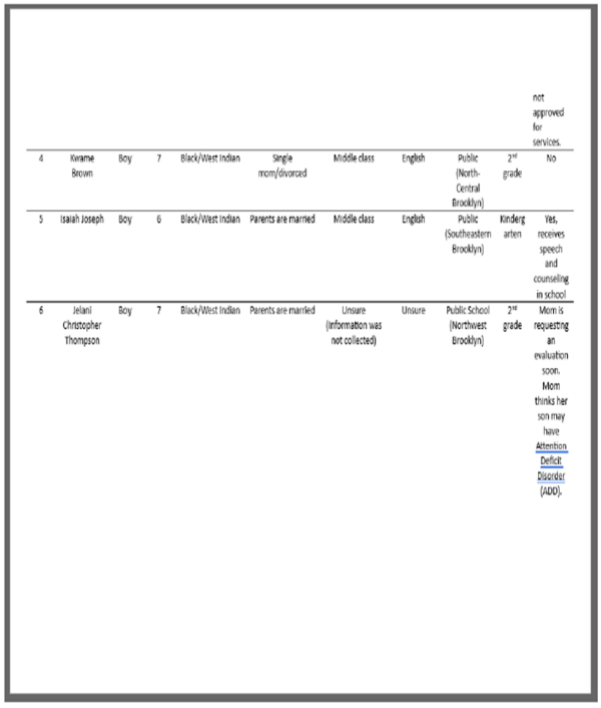
Families were recruited through social media, word of mouth, and snowball sampling methods (Naderifar et al., 2017) using a screener survey. I knew one family in the study, and I was familiar with two other families. One of the families introduced me to two additional families who expressed an interest in the study and participated in it. The criteria required that children identified as Black and attended an ECEC program (preschool through 2nd grade) within the five boroughs in New York City. While families could identify as Black, they were not required to (a family could have been raising Black children and have a different racial identity). See Figure 1 to learn more about each family.

Families were asked to complete a participant survey during the first interview where they self-reported income, family structure, their pronouns, and information to help me learn about their child. Note, the names included in Figure 1 are all pseudonyms.

Figure 1. Participants

Participant Demographics

Family #	Child's Name (Pseudonym)	Gender at Birth	Child's Age	Race/Ethnicity	Family Structure	Social Class Based on Income Only	Languages Spoken at Home	Program/ School and Geographic Location	Grade	Does the child receive special education services? (Y/N)
1	Ebony Simon	Girl	4	Black/African	Parents are married	Middle class	English, French, Spanish, and Nuer	Public (North Bronx)	Pre-K	No
	Amir Simon	Boy	7	Black/African				Public (North Bronx)	2nd	No
2	The G.O.A.T. 2015 Charles	Boy	8	Black/West Indian	Parents are married	Middle class	English	Private (Northwestern Bronx)	2nd	Yes, private services for speech
3	Moses Davis	Boy	4	Black/Native American	Single mom/ parents are separated	Working class	English	Head Start (North-Central Bronx)	3K program	No
	Jalen Davis	Boy	8	Black/Native American				Charter School (South Bronx)	2nd grade	Mom is requesting an evaluation for speech. The child was evaluated in the past but the family was



										not approved for services.
4	Kwame Brown	Boy	7	Black/West Indian	Single mom/divorced	Middle class	English	Public (North-Central Brooklyn)	2nd grade	No
5	Isaiah Joseph	Boy	6	Black/West Indian	Parents are married	Middle class	English	Public (Southeastern Brooklyn)	Kinderg arten	Yes, receives speech and counseling in school
6	Jelani Christopher Thompson	Boy	7	Black/West Indian	Parents are married	Unsure (information was not collected)	Unsure	Public School (Northwest Brooklyn)	2nd grade	Mom is requesting an evaluation soon. Mom thinks her son may have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

Data Collection

Data were triangulated across interviews, observations, and artifacts to strengthen credibility and ensure consistency across sources (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). I conducted formal semi-structured interviews (Bhattacharya, 2017) over three to four sessions in person. Artifacts which included digital tools for communication between families and schools were shared, as well as class newsletters and communications from school leadership. Some of the digital forms of school-family communication included platforms such as *ClassDojo*. Additional artifacts included digital photos, completed homework and assignments given over school breaks, classroom observations, and field notes from observations were included in the data collection. I used audio and video recordings to record my interviews with children and their families. Zoom was used for video recordings and an audio recording app on my phone captured audio recorded interviews. Handwritten notes were utilized for data collection during classroom observations and for the interview with the Head Start 3-K Teacher, Ms. Patsy. See Table 1 for a summary of data collection methods.

Table 1. Data Collection Methods

Activity	Duration	Data Collected
In-person semi-structured interviews with child participants	Two times per child for 20-30 minutes each visit	Quick notes, conversation transcript, fieldnotes, visual data
In-person semi-structured interviews with parent(s)	One time per interview for 45-60 minutes	Quick notes, conversation transcript, fieldnotes, visual data
In-person classroom observations	Two times for 30-45 minutes each visit	Quick notes, fieldnotes
In-person semi-structured interview with the Head Start 3-K lead teacher	One interview for 10-15 minutes	Quick notes

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed in several phases using Microsoft Word. I reviewed each audio or video recording shortly after interviews to ensure the audio was clear during phase one. I compared written transcripts from Zoom and the recorder app on my phone with the interview audio in the second phase of data analysis. Every recording required several hours of review as I listened to each word, utterance, and silence carefully while comparing it to the transcript. I began noting similar ideas in a document that I called "initial codes and themes." Descriptive coding (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021) allowed me to capture recurring ideas that were noted in the data through brief terms, such as community, relationships, and

affirmations. I returned to my transcripts repeatedly to determine if and how the codes changed. Once the point of data saturation was established, I used the codes to determine themes. Each theoretical framework was examined as themes took shape. Some of the themes were phrases shared by participants in the study (Ex: "Sis, do your job!," which shared Black mothers' frustration when they learned their child's teacher was not supporting them in ways the families anticipated, which spoke to Anti-Blackness).

"Help me help my child," was a theme that demonstrated ways that Black families collaborated with teachers and school staff to support their child's learning. This theme pushed back on the deficit narratives about Black children and families not valuing school and provided a counter-story to dominant narratives. Some of the ways Black families sought help included working with school staff to advocate for special education services for their child, such as speech therapy to help their child feel more successful in school. Anti-Blackness and intersectionality frameworks encouraged me to see the data through the lens of intersecting marginalized identities such as race, gender, social class, and/or dis/ability, and the relationship between identities and experiences.

"Shop talking" (Saldaña, 2016, as cited in Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021, p. 128) is a strategy that includes conversations with a trusted colleague or an advisor to allow someone else to look at a study and share their perspective on the findings. Codes and themes were confirmed by "shop talking" with trusted early childhood and early care colleagues.

Moving Towards the Light

As I reconceptualize the ECEC values of centering care, strengthening collaborations, and prioritizing joy, peace, love, and security, to allow for thriving livelihoods, I envision a different world where the communities that are often the most marginalized are the leaders in creating a new world in which everyone can thrive. I employ an ethic of care framework (Noddings, 2013), along with the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2011) framework to examine global challenges through the three ECEC values mentioned previously.

The ethic of care framework (Noddings, 2013) highlights relationality and caring as a human capacity. This framework rejects the notion of individualism and independence, positing that humans are inherently relational and interdependent. I aim to demonstrate how our world can become more humane and just if we use ECEC values to guide our actions as we face global challenges.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2024), common values such as collaborations and communication between families, caregivers, and educators, prioritizing joy (peace, love, and security), and centering care in ECEC are essential to thriving childhoods. These shared ECEC values are evident in countries around the world.

We Before Me (Strengthening Collaborations)

Global challenges are not new. It was not that long ago when the world was sheltering in place due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. During the pandemic, it was critical that we relied on each other to make choices that prioritized the needs of the community versus individual needs. This collective effort equipped

us to combat the virus and increase our chances of survival. We witnessed a softer side of humanity during the pandemic when strangers and neighbors expressed care for one another by grocery shopping for an elderly or sick community member who was unable to do so themselves. The continuous displays of collective care and interdependence as witnessed during the pandemic served as a reminder of our strength when we work together.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that we are all connected, despite our geographical distance, which can present the illusion that our livelihoods are not intertwined. It is both untrue and consequential to believe anything otherwise.

We can adapt and reconceive the ECEC value of strengthening collaborations between families and educators to strengthening collaborations between neighbors and communities (*within and between communities*), similar to what we witnessed during the pandemic, as we build a future that works better for everyone. Similarly, we can adopt the ECEC value of prioritizing joy, peace, love, and security as essential to our common humanity while also adopting the ECEC value of centering care, which speaks to an ethic of care. Prioritizing joy, peace, love, and security as essential to thriving childhoods is demonstrated through daily practices in ECEC (Ex: songs that remind young children to "keep your hands to yourself") as a way of providing guidelines and boundaries for how young children can interact with each other. This simple but effective reminder, "keep your hands to yourself," helps children learn about body awareness and boundaries which supports social interactions, developing friendships, collaborations, and a sense of security and peace.

This last value is evidenced in the ways young children seek comfort during the day to regulate themselves and restore their sense of peace and security. Interactions with friends and teachers strengthen relationships and connections in the classroom community, thereby reinforcing feelings of joy, peace, love and security. Young children find ways to strengthen relationships, which often occur through collaborations such as playing together to build something using classroom materials or taking the time to support each other during classroom routines and jobs (Ex: Table setters who help with snack and other meals, line leader, and the caboose of the line). Finally, the value of prioritizing joy, peace, love, and security as essential to thriving childhoods is often demonstrated in the way ECEC values function, which leads to reduced stress for young children and the ability to navigate their day with greater confidence, security, and joy.

The global challenges we face are interconnected. Racial injustice is often a factor in housing unaffordability, gun violence, displacement (Elsheikh & Ayazi, 2017; United Nations, n.d.) and determining which communities are most impacted by climate change (United States Environmental Protection Agency, n.d.). ECEC values remind us to prioritize joy, peace, love, and security for *everyone* since we are all connected and our humanity is intertwined with that of our neighbors. The challenges we face as a society will require a collective effort to create innovative solutions to our problems. I believe that we can meet these global challenges if we strengthen our collaborations at the local and state level and ultimately between nations. Governments can do their part to ensure a life of dignity and remove barriers, instead of allowing barriers to reduce people when examined through the capabilities approach which speaks

of the ten Central Capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011). These capabilities include being able to live the length of a normal life and not having one's life reduced to one not worth living or dying earlier than expected. They also include having the ability to feel emotions such as love and grief, which centers care and highlights our relationality (ethic of care). Governments can also invite marginalized communities into the design and planning phases to implement policies and practices that can lead to long-term, sustainable solutions.

Findings

Findings demonstrated that young Black children and families resisted anti-Blackness in ECEC by strengthening collaborations with educators, which led to better learning outcomes and an increased sense of security, safety, and belonging for their children (and themselves) at school. Thus, also centering care. Findings also showed that young Black children and their families prioritized joy, peace, love, and security as essential to thriving childhoods. Some of the findings overlap and fit into more than one ECEC value. I will note how the findings show up in more than one ECEC value when that occurs.

Centering Care

Although Black boys are often seen as aggressors or disruptors, despite their young age in early childhood and early elementary grades (Essien & Wood, 2022), they are often trying their best to do the right thing. Young Black boys often want to stay out of trouble, as demonstrated in an excerpt from my interview with 8-year-old Jalen Davis (a social child who loved basketball and had a language delay at the time). In the excerpt Jalen describes a frustrating interaction with a boy on the school bus:

> …and yeah, and I don't like when… like people want to fight with me on the bus. Uh…I'm just on the bus chilling until…This guy has to …walk up and like. 'What's up?' But his name (inaudible)…he annoys us. He…We…when we say can you leave us alone…he just… don't. He just…and he don't mean…he he he he….he just like …we're just chilling he's just chilling… he's just get up out his seat and comes in the back. He just looking at us and he starts say…arguing with my friend.

Jalen's excerpt demonstrated his attempt to stay out of trouble with the child who he described as "annoying" to him and his friend. Although Jalen and his friend asked the other boy to "leave them alone," the other child did not. Instead, the other boy continued looking at Jalen and his friend interrupting them as they "chill" and eventually arguing with Jalen's friend. Upon learning about the issue on the school bus, Jalen's mother, Shaquan, immediately contacted the school to voice her concerns.

The school's response resisted anti-Blackness and centered care for Jalen by taking the time to learn more about the interactions he was describing, thus providing a more positive experience to and from school for Jalen and the child he was encountering a problem with. This reframed how boys like Jalen are typically discussed in dominant narratives from that of a possible "aggressor" or "problem child" to a young Black boy in need of care. Jalen demonstrated his ability to share his narrative separate from the narrative that his mother would share, which speaks to critical childhood studies and young children's ability to narrate their own stories. Jalen appeared more confident and comfortable traveling between home and school as a result of the collaboration

between the school and his family. This ultimately led him to remain focused on learning and socializing with friends during the school day. With Jalen's sense of security and peace restored, Jalen could focus on being a child. Jalen and Shaquan Davis's narratives also fall under the ECEC value of strengthening collaborations, as Shaquan brought her concerns to the school's attention and began problem-solving solutions with them.

The Davis family's narrative also relates to the ECEC value of prioritizing joy, peace, love, and security as essential to thriving childhoods. Indeed, Jalen was not able to thrive or find peace or security during the interactions with his classmates that were taking place on the school bus. Although the interactions did not occur in school, they were a part of how Jalen *experienced* school, as his travel to and from school helped to shape his overall perception of the day.

Care was also centered in a narrative shared by 7-year-old Amir's mother, Zory, when she recounted a story where she resisted anti-Blackness as a parent while also *strengthening her collaboration* with one of Amir's teachers. In the narrative Zory reflected on an interaction with her son's white teacher who developed a lesson on identity, race, and hair textures as a way of affirming children, following an incident where kids were making fun of Amir for wearing his hair in locs. Locs are a popular cultural hairstyle in the Black community. This narrative demonstrates evidence of all three ECEC values discussed in this paper. I describe the interaction in more detail in the prioritizing joy, peace, love, and security section.

Strengthening Collaborations

Strong collaborations can lead to better outcomes for everyone involved. This was the case with Shanice Thompson, mother of 8-year-old Jelani Christopher, who quickly moved into action to change the narrative about her young Black son being seen as a "problem," a narrative that was probably all too familiar to her as a Black educator. Some of the "problematic" issues stemmed from her son's enthusiasm to socialize with friends and his tendency to get distracted and veer off task in his classroom. After speaking with her son's teacher, Shanice took the initiative in designing a visual aid tracker for Jelani Christopher with his input and the input of his 1st grade teacher, which altered his path that year and led to success in his classroom. Jelani Christopher's 1st grade teacher either did not see or *could not* see his talkative nature for what it was, a child who was simply exuberant in a new setting where he could socialize with more children after attending a much smaller early childhood program in previous years.

Shanice collaborated with Jelani Christopher and his teacher to design a tracker to keep on his desk as a visual aid, reminding him of the importance of completing tasks like focusing on his teacher when she was speaking and remaining quiet when his teacher was talking. Shanice incorporated Jelani Christopher's love of watching a dinosaur truck show as an incentive to motivate him to use and follow the tracker each day at school. Shanice's position as a teacher helped her counter the narrative about her Black son who was getting in trouble and missing out on outdoor play time (Bryan et al., 2024). Shanice and her son created a new narrative where Jelani Christopher was positioned as a child who was able to follow the expectations of a classroom with more children than he was previously accustomed to in his homeschool. Jelani Christopher was able to thrive in his public school as a result of a stronger collaboration between his family and his teacher.

Prioritize Joy, Peace, Love, and Security

Early childhood education and early care settings can help young children understand and affirm racial and cultural differences through read-alouds and the important discussions that accompany them. Zory Simon recounted an incident when her son kept insisting that he cut off his locs without any further explanation. Zory trusted her instincts and delayed his request, thinking that there was more to Amir's request than he was sharing. Eventually, Zory learned about an explicit encounter with anti-Blackness in his early childhood classroom when classmates made fun of Amir's hair, saying his hair looked like noodles. Zory made a plan to resist that anti-Black narrative by strengthening her collaboration with her son's white teacher and prioritizing joy, peace, love, and her son's sense of (racial and psychological) security. Zory's decision to wait to cut her son's locs proved to be a good one as she soon discovered the real reason why Amir wanted to change his hair.

Essien and Wood (2021) explored microaggressions faced by young Black girls due to how they wore their hair which included styles like braids, dreadlocks, afros, twists, and cornrows. The experience Zory described demonstrates how young Black boys *also* face teasing and microaggressions for the ways they express their cultural pride through hairstyles. Smith et al. (2023) discusses the importance of Black hair to signify African American racial identity group membership. It is worth noting Amir's mom, Zory, and his 4-year-old sister, Ebony, wore their hair proudly in locs, which speaks to both Amir's cultural identity and his identity as a member of the family. Zory shared her conversation with Amir's teacher and the response received after sharing her concerns:

> I said, hey, you know I, I don't send my child to school to be you know, made fun of, for his hair being natural the way that it is, and it's not okay. And she agreed with me, and she said that she would, you know, speak to the parents and speak to the students. She was able to speak with those students.

Zory could have easily taken a different approach to navigating the interaction her son shared with her. As a Black parent who expressed affirmations regularly with her children and reminded them that they were loved and cared for on a daily basis, Zory needed to know that her children would be cared for in her absence. Zory was pleased to see that they were. She noted how Amir's light and joy appeared to return after his teacher incorporated a lesson on racial identity and hair textures into her curriculum. Thus, opening up a space for children to see themselves in the story while developing an appreciation for hair types and racial and cultural identities unlike their own.

Conclusion

We have the power to steer the future in a different and more humane direction by learning lessons from ECEC values that include centering care through stronger collaborations, and prioritizing joy, peace, love and security for every individual through relationships and care. An ethic of care framework highlights the importance of relationships and provides a critical and urgent reminder that our lives are intertwined. Similarly, the capabilities approach reminds us that each life is worthy of dignity and individuals should be able to live the length of a normal life which requires interconnectedness through care and cooperation. Further, the capabilities approach stresses individuals should be able to express emotions such as joy and grief

which connects back to an ethic of care and relationality.

The devastating long-term effects of concurrent global challenges is currently impacting communities across the world. The outcomes are not reserved for one community or geographic location. Therefore, we will either reap the benefits of a collective effort to confront these challenges together (lessons found in ECEC values), or pay the consequences together. The future is ours to determine.

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