

“Who Gets to be a Child?” Mothering Young Children of Color with Disabilities and the Politics
of Resisting Normalcy

Maggie Beneke

Shayla Collins

Selma Powell

In Washington state, schools are not legally allowed to use restraint or isolation as a form of punishment, or as a way to try to correct a child's behavior (Washington State Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds, 2020). So why was eight-year-old Jaleel*, a young Black child with a disability attending elementary school in Seattle, repeatedly locked in an outdoor fenced area when he became overwhelmed or upset, without his mother's knowledge? As Seattle's KUOW (2020) reported, Jaleel's behavior was interpreted as so outside normative notions of social-emotional competence that the principal received district approval to use the outdoor space— which was visible to his teachers and peers, and where Jaleel often ate his lunch alone from a tray on the concrete floor— as a part of Jaleel's special education plan. Jaleel's mother, Janelle*, described Jaleel as a child who loves to care for younger children and engage in hands-on projects. Janelle, who first heard of this treatment from Jaleel himself and immediately confronted Jaleel's principal, is now suing Seattle Public Schools. She poignantly stated, "If I was to lock my son up in a closet, they'd be quick to call CPS on me. So why is it that y'all can lock my son up?" (Dornfeld, 2020).

Though Jaleel and Janelle's story may seem shocking, their experience represents larger patterns of surveillance, pathologization, and criminalization that many Children of Color with disabilities and their families experience in schools (Annamma, 2018; Hannon, 2019), patterns that begin in early childhood (Author1, 2021a; Author1, 2021b). Like Janelle, Mothers of Color who have young children with disabilities are often on the front lines (Gumbs et al., 2016; Lalvani, 2019), fighting for the possibility that school might be a place where their children are protected, affirmed, and loved. This project focuses on how Mothers of Color who have young children with disabilities navigate educational systems, how they make meaning of underlying

constitutions of competence within schools, and how they conceptualize possibility for justice in early childhood. Our study unapologetically centered the perspectives of Mothers of Color whose young children are labeled with or “at risk” for disabilities in relation to these questions:

1. How do Mothers of Color who have young children with or “at risk” for disabilities position themselves and their children in relation to normative notions of “competence” in early childhood?
2. As Mothers discuss their experiences navigating early childhood systems, how do they reveal their priorities and dreams for educational justice in early childhood?

Interrogating Constructions of Competence in (Early) Education

Our project builds on scholarship troubling linkages between ableism and racism in schooled constructions of competence. *Racism* refers to systemic expressions of power (in structures, actions, beliefs) that rely on constructions of race (Omi & Winant, 2015). *Ableism* refers to the systemic ranking, valuing, and categorizing of people’s bodies and minds, based on socially constructed ideals of competency (Lewis, 2020). Scholars argue that racism has always been simultaneously rooted in ableism (Annamma et al., 2013; Kendi, 2016), such that schools regularly define and measure competence (in thinking, learning, behavior) in proximity to whiteness (Baynton, 2001; Du Bois, 1920; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). Ability is distributed and withheld through sociocultural activity and structural arrangements (Annamma et al., 2020; Author 1, 2021). By locating deficiencies within children’s bodies and minds, schools justify the exclusion of children labeled with disabilities (Baglieri et al., 2011; Ferri & Connor, 2011), with harmful consequences for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children labeled with disabilities (Reid & Knight, 2006).

Though often overlooked, racial-ability hierarchies begin early on young children’s educational trajectories. For instance, early childhood professionals regularly position the

development of schooled competencies (e.g., talking in multi-word sentences; matching and sorting shapes; dressing oneself independently) as universal, predictable, and desirable (Burman, 2007)—assumptions deeply rooted in ableist (Eilers, 2020; Ferri & Bacon, 2011) and white^[1], Eurocentric perspectives (Ejuu, 2013; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Children determined to meet these norms and benchmarks are deemed competent, while those who do not are labeled with disabilities. Moreover, early childhood curricular frameworks and behavioral expectations dually uphold whiteness (Bryan, 2020; Nxumalo, 2019; Templeton & Cheruvu, 2020) and narrow notions of ability (Lalvani & Bacon, 2018; Watson, 2018), institutionally positioning early educators to encourage children’s assimilation into racist-ableist schooling practices (Park et al., 2021). Further, legislation and assessment practices reinforce notions of normative development by emphasizing early detection of children suspected to be “at risk” for disability (Baker, 2002; Ferri & Bacon, 2011). For young Children of Color, special education identification processes become a form of “ability profiling” (Collins, 2013) which initiate ongoing cycles of surveillance, categorization, intervention, and/or exclusion within the project of schooling. Therefore, we situate our study within a body of work that recognizes that presumptions that children adhere to schooled constructions of competence can perpetuate harm for Children of Color labeled with disabilities.

In the United States (U.S.), we see the consequences of labeling and sorting children in relation to dominant notions of competence in the overrepresentation of Children of Color in special education (Artiles et al., 2010; Ford & Russo, 2016). Washington’s state-level data reflect these national patterns. As of November 2019, Children of Color with disabilities made up 47.34% of the total 152,495 children (ages 3-21 years) served under IDEA in Washington State (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [OSPI], 2019). State-level data indicated

that, in comparison to all other racial groups, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children were more likely to be labeled with a disability (IDEA Data Center, 2018). As of Fall 2017, 44% of children with disabilities spent the majority of their school day outside of general education classrooms in Washington, making the state one of the 10 most restrictive states for children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Moreover, across disability categories, Children of Color were more likely to be excluded from general education settings in Washington (OSPI, 2019). Indeed, once labeled, Children of Color with disabilities are more likely to be placed in segregated and restrictive school settings with lower achievement expectations (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013), and increased risk for juvenile incarceration (Annamma, 2018; Gregory et al., 2010; Losen et al., 2014). Yet a sole focus on the problem of overrepresentation of Children of Color in special education may tacitly suggest that “proportionate” representation in special education would adequately redress these longstanding inequities (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). Instead, we must interrogate how and why these inequities occur. Ranking and categorizing children based on their displays of dominant schooling practices-- deeply rooted in narrow notions of ability and predominantly white ways of being-- allows educational systems to position some children as outside the bounds of competence (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016), perpetuating racial-ability hierarchies (Thorius, 2019).

Mothering Racialized and Disabled Children

Mothers of Color often bear the responsibility of navigating disability identification, educational placement decisions, and instructional supports with/for their young children (McHatton & Correa, 2005) through rights-based frameworks (Hong, 2020). That is, special education services for children, organized as legal rights, assume that *access* to general education settings, and interventions aimed at bringing children closer to widely accepted notions of

competence (Antonsen, 2020; Arndt et al., 2015), will achieve equity. As a core principle of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; Turnbull et al., 2015), parent participation in educational decision-making is regarded as crucial to this process (Love et al., 2017). Yet educational decision-making for young children with disabilities, fundamentally organized and directed through IDEA, typically takes place in legalistic meetings that prioritize compliance, efficiency, and educator expertise (Bray & Russell, 2016; Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Skrtic, 1991). In the context of such institutional power arrangements, Mothers of Color—who have historically been scrutinized and blamed for their children’s disabilities (Kaoma, 2005)—are often positioned to negotiate the labeling of their children, challenge professional recommendations, advocate for resources and supports, and/or resist their children’s academic and social exclusion (Cioè-Peña, 2020; Lalvani, 2018).

A small body of research documents ways Mothers of Color who have young children with disabilities experience and resist ableism and racism in early childhood settings. McHatton and Correa (2005) revealed the stigma and discrimination that Mexican and Puerto Rican single mothers experienced from educational professionals about themselves as parents *and* their children with disabilities. Through a multi-year ethnographic study, Harry and colleagues (2005) found that school personnel regularly overlooked the strengths and wisdom of Black mothers of young children with disabilities, and instead, considered their parenting practices as dysfunctional. Cheatham and Jimenez-Silva (2012) analyzed parent-teacher conference discourse, highlighting the ways an educator discounted a Latina mother’s strategic attempts to advocate for her child. Though nondominant families may offer insights, understandings, and opportunities to reshape educational practice (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Ishimaru, 2018),

little research has positioned Mothers of Color as knowledge generators, asking how they reflect on or critique current educational systems as they conceptualize possibilities for the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent uprisings in the Movement for Black Lives create a context in which interrogating ableism and racism in early childhood— from the perspective of Mothers— is as urgent as ever. In the context of the pandemic and ongoing anti-Black racism, scholars of educational justice call for reckoning with what counts as “normal” in schools, urging the field to reimagine what taken-for-granted schooling practices can be (Annamma & Stovall, 2020; McKinney de Royston et al., 2020). As teachers have now quite literally become guests in multiply-marginalized young children’s homes, we must listen to families about what learning matters (Ishimaru, 2020). In this project, and in these complex times, we sought to deepen understandings about what learning matters by centering the perspectives of Mothers of Color who have young children with or “at risk” for disabilities. Examining the ways Mothers articulate perceptions of “competence,” as well as their priorities and dreams for their children’s educations, is necessary for dismantling ableism and racism in early childhood.

Conceptual Framing

We conceptually framed our study through two complementary perspectives: Disability Critical Race Theory (Annamma et al., 2013) and revolutionary mothering (Gumbs et al., 2016).

Disability Critical Race Theory

Building on foundational intersectional analyses by Black feminists (e.g., Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989), Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013) addresses implicit and explicit ways that ableism and racism intersect to socially construct standards of whiteness and ability as normative and desirable. DisCrit exposes how Children of Color with disabilities are often positioned outside social perceptions of what is considered normal and can

be positioned as “less than” (Erevelles et al., 2006). Our study uses DisCrit to examine how ableism and racism materialize in the lives of young Children of Color with disabilities and their mothers within Washington’s early childhood systems, and how Mothers of Color articulate and resist dominant notions of “competence.” Additionally, DisCrit recognizes multiply-marginalized populations to be experts of their experiences in inequitable systems (Matsuda, 1987). In our study, we foreground the perspectives of Mothers of Color who have young children who are “at-risk” for or who have been identified with disabilities, positioning them as legitimate, valuable research partners in this process (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Paris & Winn, 2013).

Revolutionary Mothering

Revolutionary mothering draws from the lineage of radical and queer Black feminists (Jordan, 2005; Lorde, 1984), placing marginalized mothers at the center of visioning for the future (Gumbs et al., 2016). As Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2016) wrote, mothering includes: “Those of us who nurture the lives of those children who are not supposed to exist, who are not supposed to grow up, who are revolutionary in their very beings...” (p. 20). From this lens, mothering moves beyond an individual biological function and can instead be conceived as a politicized act, deeply rooted in defiance and radical love (Ross, 2016). Such a view of mothering includes political clarity (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; McKinney de Royston, 2020), or sociopolitical consciousness about the realities of hostile educational systems that perpetuate real harm for multiply-marginalized children (Hannon, 2018; Freire, 1970/2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lalvani & Hale, 2015). In our study, revolutionary mothering helped us to consider how Mothers of Color who have young children with disabilities defend the lives of children who are “not

supposed to exist” within dehumanizing institutions, articulating tangible concerns in the present while offering powerful visions for the future.

Together, DisCrit and revolutionary mothering conceptually framed our analysis. These complementary perspectives supported us in considering how Mothers of Color enacted political clarity regarding both ableism and racism as they challenged dominant notions of “competence” in early childhood, strategically seeking to protect multiply-marginalized children from harm while simultaneously dreaming for liberatory educational futures.

Methods

The data for this analysis are derived from a qualitative study, in which we used focus groups to examine how Mothers experience, resist, and imagine beyond ableism and racism in schools. Through guided discussions, focus groups generate understanding about the ways participants collectively understand an issue and construct meaning about it (Liamputtong, 2011), while eliciting new and diverse perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Yosso et al., 2009). Through our focus groups, Mothers of Color realized they were not alone in navigating hostile early childhood systems. That is, focus groups provided a space for us to listen to participants, but also for Mothers to listen to each other.

In co-facilitating focus groups and co-analyzing data, we grappled with our own experiences navigating notions of competence as mothers and as representatives of an academic institution. Author1 is a white, nondisabled mother of two young children without disabilities, a former early childhood teacher, and a scholar of inclusive early childhood education. As a child, she herself was labeled with a disability that required she receive intervention; she knows that her whiteness protected her from being further funneled out of classrooms. Author2 is a Black mother of two young children with disabilities. She is a born and raised Seattleite who attended

Seattle Public Schools and now resides in South King County. Author3 is a white, nondisabled U.S. immigrant mother of two teenagers without disabilities, a former special educator, and current director of a special education teacher preparation program.

We recognized that our own experiences navigating notions of “competence” in early childhood both converge and diverge from participants’ experiences. In our role as researchers, we committed to furthering early childhood education approaches that challenge ableism and racism as a form of harm reduction. Knowing how damage-centered research often constructs one-dimensional views of marginalized peoples (Tuck, 2009), we intentionally resisted engaging methods that would solely document Mothers’ pain and experiences of oppression. We instead sought to understand Mothers’ critiques, hopes, and desires in the context of their and their children’s lives.

Participants and Setting

Study participants consisted of Mothers of Color who had children with or “at risk” for disabilities, and whose children were served by school districts in Washington state. We gathered participants purposively (Merriam, 2009), deliberately seeking focus group participation through local organizations (e.g., Arc of King County, Open Doors for Multicultural Families, Families of Color Seattle, Rooted in Rights) with connections to Mothers who have been organizing in response to racial disparities in special education identification, placement, and experiences. Thirty-three Mothers participated in ten focus groups. Given our analytic focus on ableism and racism in early childhood, in this paper we focus on the perspectives of a subset of participants, focusing on twenty-one Mothers of Color who, at the time of the study, had young children (birth - 9 years old) served by the following school districts: Edmonds, Federal Way, Highline, Kent, Mukilteo, Northshore, Olympia, Puyallup, Seattle, Shoreline, and Spokane. Two Mothers

identified as disabled. See Table 1 for additional demographic information. Throughout the paper, all participant names are represented with pseudonyms.

Table 1 <i>Participating Mothers and Their Children</i>			
Mother's name	Mother's racial identity^a	Child's (children's) age(s)^b	Child's (children's) disability label(s)
Dena	Black	5.11 & 7.3	Autism, emotional disturbance, speech and language impairment
Kim	Multiracial	8.1	Developmental delay
Rae	Multiracial	7.2	Emotional disturbance
Kayla	Multiracial	2.6	Hearing impairment
Lia	Latinx/Hispanic	9	Specific learning disability
Nissa	Black	5.0	Developmental delay
Aleta	Latina	6	Autism
Karine	Asian	3.5	Autism, sensory processing disorder
Linda	Multiracial	5.4	Autism
Joy	Asian/Pacific Islander	9	Autism, speech or language impairment
Ana	Latina	5	Intellectual disability
Chelsea	Multiracial	7	"at risk"
Zoe	Multiracial	4.5	Developmental delay

Maia	Black	5	Speech and language impairment, sensory processing disorder
Lua	Indigenous Latinx	3.75	Autism, speech and language impairment
Erika	Black	7	Speech and language impairment
Michelle	Multiracial	4.1 & 5.11	Autism
Annissa	Mexican/Indigenous	8	ADHD, anxiety
June	Black	5 (twins)	Developmental delay
Rhonda	Native/Indigenous	9	Intellectual disability

^aWe share Mothers' own self-reported racial identities. ^bChild's age reported in years and months (i.e., 3.5 = 3 years, 5 months).

Data Generation

Focus group participation ranged from two to six Mothers and lasted between 75-125 minutes. Our first five audio-recorded focus groups took place in person. Following state-wide restrictions for in-person gatherings due to COVID-19, our final five focus groups took place in video-recorded virtual meetings. At least two authors of the current study facilitated or co-facilitated each focus group. Interview questions focused on Mothers' experiences navigating early education systems and their visions for educational justice. Open-ended questions fell into four categories: (a) descriptions of their children's strengths; (b) experiences advocating for change in early educational systems; (c) visions for educational justice in early childhood; and (d) aspirations and hopes for their children. Our conversations generated 202 pages of single-spaced transcripts as well as 16 artifacts that Mothers referenced or shared with us and with each other related to their critiques and visions for educational justice. Artifacts included: social media

posts (2); news articles (2); educational mission statements (4); academic articles (4); classroom teaching materials (2); and found objects (2).

Data Analysis

With our research questions in mind, we iteratively searched for patterns in the data (Srivastava & Hopwood 2009). Using *Dedoose* qualitative software we engaged in three cycles of inductive and deductive analysis: (1) initial coding; (2) focused coding; and (3) theoretical integration. In our first cycle of coding, transcripts and artifacts were eclectically coded (Saldaña 2015), meaning we combined several coding methods (i.e., descriptive, in vivo, and process coding) as we analyzed and unitized each data source line-by-line. As we initially coded, we constructed tentative code definitions together within *Dedoose*. During our second coding cycle, we drew on comparative methods coding (Charmaz, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) looking across excerpts of data within each code, shifting units of data, and revising existing code definitions. Through focused coding, we collapsed our 48 initial codes (e.g., *I get no information, needs being met*) into five code categories: *descriptions of children, schooling, mothers learning systems, resistance, possible futures*. During our third cycle, we returned to the literature and our conceptual framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016), connecting our coding scheme to existing theory and scholarship to construct themes.

We took several steps to enhance the trustworthiness of our analysis. First, by coordinating multiple data sources and types of data, we actively sought disconfirming evidence to challenge our findings. This process of looking for inconsistent and contradictory findings supported in-depth analysis for substantiating such inconsistency and allowed us to check our understandings of the social processes we sought to explain (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). We also engaged in regular peer debriefing and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to

confirming our interpretations of Mothers' perspectives in the context of focus groups, we also shared a draft of our final report with participants for feedback, integrating their perspectives into our final analysis.

Findings

In this section, we share three findings that explore how Mothers positioned themselves and their children in relation to “competence,” as well as their priorities for justice in early childhood: (a) mothering against normalcy; (b) learning systems and pushing back; and (c) dreaming beyond the status quo.

Mothering Against Normalcy

In their conversations and through the artifacts they shared, Mothers regularly explicated and critiqued multiple ways that “normalcy” in early education positioned their children as incompetent and less-than, and how they mothered against these constructions. For example, Linda explained how she views her child in comparison to schooled constructions of her child:

Very little time is given to...discuss [her] strengths ... It's wiped away sometimes with the comment, “She doesn't demonstrate this in the classroom.” ...When she gets to step into the Puget [sound] or the lake... she's a different kid. She's happy...she's signing water. Connections are being made instantly right there...*this is open, this is nature, here's the sun, this is my shadow, here's water, here are plants, this is green...*it's beautiful. But eventually she's going to have to be able to sit down in a room, and, unfortunately, lack of a better word is, perform.

Linda's mothering included cultivating her daughter's connection with water and nature, a space where her child thrived, unconstrained by schooled expectations to “sit down” and “perform.” Moreover, Linda reckoned with the pressures for her child to conform to schooled expectations

early on in her educational trajectory, constructing her identities and capacities through a deficit-based lens. This view resonated with many of the Mothers we spoke with, who, like Linda, felt that their motherly insights into their children's strengths and interests were regularly dismissed.

Kim further explicated these critiques of normalcy, sharing concerns surrounding the presumed uniformity and desirability of normative development:

We're in a society that seems to have...a formula for developing the ideal child. Like if you do this and this right, then your child will achieve this and have this opportunity ... and it just doesn't work that way...yeah I think he's shown a lot of growth but it's all come at a price for him emotionally... I want him to be considered as a whole person [but it's] really hard because they want to focus on the deficit and what he can't do.

Kim's apprehensions pointed to the ways dominant notions of development, rooted in whiteness and narrow constructions of ability, diminished her child's ways of being. As a consequence, educational interventions that encouraged her child's assimilation to such norms negatively impacted his emotional well-being. Kim complicated the assumption that any such formula ever works out meritocratically, questioning whether she could continue to subject her child to such practices.

Mothers further asserted that status-quo notions of normalcy perpetuate exclusionary institutional responses in early childhood. Ana, a Latinx mother, shared her perspectives on these institutional responses this way:

Having a [disability] diagnosis labels a lot and pushes the person away...[with] the developmental preschools....you are already secluding. Even the names that they give – “container class,” “contain” I mean, to me, it's like, why do you contain?

Here, Ana reflected on the ways educational systems use disability to funnel children who are not seen as “normal” out of educational settings and into spaces of containment, beginning in preschool. According to Ana, developmental preschools – early childhood special education classrooms structured to meet children’s “pre-academic needs” – usually included ~10 students with disability labels and one or two “peer models.” As multiple Mothers stated, these spaces of containment allow the educational system to continue operating as-is, in ways that uphold whiteness and normative ideas of learning and progress. For Ana, this meant mothering against the idea that her child-- institutionally constructed as incompetent-- needed to be contained.

Mothers also shared how they mothered against the pervasiveness of false respect. For example, Lua shared a Tumblr post by Autistic teen blogger @stimmyabby (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Lua’s artifact: Tumblr post by Autistic teen blogger @stimmyabby

Lua explained:

[Schools say] that to kids all the time. That if you want what you want, you have to listen to exactly what I say and exactly the way I say it. So...kids learn that “might makes

right,” and they take that out into the world, and the world will validate that over and over and over again in the worst ways...we need to show kids respect so that they'll learn respect. But we are also using different words for what respect means... my child being a non-verbal Black child, him as a person and his age aren't seen the way that other kids' ages and humanity are seen.

Applying the Tumblr post to the context of schools, Lua reflected on how early educational systems define respect as individual assimilation to adult expectations. From Lua's perspective, such dominant definitions of respect— that devalue multiple means of expression and discount young children's agency— justify the dehumanization of her non-verbal Black child. Moreover, Lua considered this schooled notion of respect as a kind of curriculum that all children learn, teaching children their worth in relation to others, and how to be with other people. To resist these dehumanizing processes, Lua (like a few of the Mothers in our study) made the decision to homeschool her child.

Finally, Mothers discussed how dehumanizing schooling processes legitimized more extreme forms of punishment. When Nissa joined us, she referenced a news article about a Black six-year-old child with a disability who was arrested for her behavior. Nissa shared, “Knowing the fact that as a kid as young as six years old can be arrested, that doesn't exempt my daughter at all. So it's just like, okay, something needs to happen.” Nissa understood this child's arrest to be dually related to the child's Blackness and her disability, identity markers which Nissa's own preschool-aged child shared. Nissa's reflections showed how she was already preparing to fight a system that criminalizes kindergarteners. Like Nissa, Michelle came to our conversation armed with data (see Figure 2) documenting the ways Children of Color with disabilities, and Black children with disabilities in particular, are hyper-criminalized.

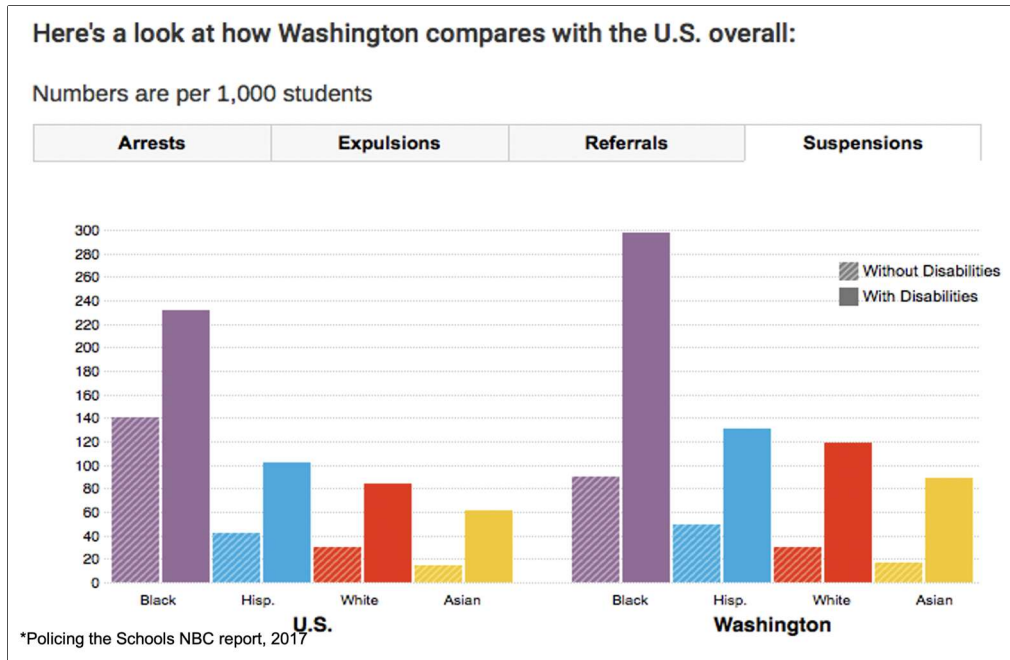


Figure 2. Michelle’s artifact: Children’s suspensions (by race and disability) nationally compared to WA

Michelle stated, “[Our] kids are not well educated, taken care for....it feels awful to say that, well, if you don't care of them...they will end up in prison or they will end up dead or so forth. But I have to keep reminding people that the consequences are really dire.” For Michelle, mothering against normalcy meant she was continuing to remind people of her child’s humanity. In naming early childhood settings – spaces often associated with care – as sites of punishment, both Nissa and Michelle revealed their resistance against ableism and racism. Indeed, Mothers illustrated the many ways they mothered against early childhood systems that relied on dominant notions of competence to construct their children as outside the bounds of childhood, withholding rights, benefits, and care.

Learning Exclusionary Systems and Pushing Back

With political clarity, Mothers shared how they learned to navigate exclusionary early childhood systems and strategically push back. In particular, Mothers talked about the necessity

of resisting in community with other Mothers of Color who have children with disabilities. Aleta, whose child transitioned to a special education kindergarten classroom in the same year that her husband had been detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, described her own “mental exhaustion” in trying to participate in her child’s education. Feeling alone and as though her child’s educational placement decisions were often made before she even joined the meetings, Aleta connected with other Mothers in a Facebook group, so that she could, “...listen to other parents’ experiences, especially the ones that have older children [so] that I know some of the things that they had to go to get those [inclusive] services...the inside about how the system works.” Similarly, Nissa talked about gathering with other Parents of Color who have children with disabilities, explaining the value of, “being able to share those same stories. It was just like finally there's someone else that knows what I'm going through...that's how you're going to find out about these things...the knowledge, the resources, the community.” Indeed, for Mothers who were fighting for their children’s right to exist in early educational systems, sharing knowledge, resources, and community was an essential way they held one another as they pushed back.

Mothers engaged in this knowledge- and resource-sharing throughout our focus groups. For instance, as Dena talked about advocating for her children’s inclusion in early childhood settings, she described what it means to speak up as a Black Mother of children with disabilities. Dena shared her experiences navigating the system this way:

I feel that the system...was never designed to tolerate anything different other than white males. So outside of that you are already at a disadvantage when you add Black to that, with disabilities, we got a whole different ball game that we're dealing with. And it's already stacked against you and...you're supposed to speak tactfully and nicely...So you

have to be very careful when you're advocating with your child depending on how you present and I [learned] that very quickly. They called CPS on our family...twice.

Dena depicted how early educators repeatedly read her advocacy attempts as threatening, questioning her parenting competencies to the point that they called Child Protective Services. At the same time, Dena critiqued the system itself, recognizing how its fundamental design upholds whiteness, cis-heteropatriarchy, and normative notions of ability. Thus, Dena surfaced a critical tension around advocating for her children's inclusion into a system she did not fully believe in, knowing her advocacy attempts would be read as un-motherly. Understanding this tension, Maia shared her own approach, stating, "I found in a lot of environments, [I just have to] make it clear: I'm just going to sit here in this room until you let my kid show up as himself and support him." Like Dena and Maia, the Mothers we spoke with recognized the ways their parenting was surveilled and— with love on the line— they also understood silence was not an option.

Karine explained the ways she deliberately drew on research to position herself as knowledgeable. As she described advocating for the inclusion of her Autistic child into general education settings, Karine pointed out three different peer-reviewed articles (see example in Figure 3) on racial bias and the experiences of children with Autism with the other Mothers in the focus group.

Do Implicit and Explicit Racial Biases Influence Autism Identification and Stigma? An Implicit Association Test Study

Rita Obeid^{1,6,7} · Jennifer Bailey Bisson² · Alexandra Cosenza³ · Ashley J. Harrison⁴ · Faith James³ · Sabine Saade^{5,8,9} · Kristen Gillespie-Lynch^{6,9}

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Figure 3. One of Karine's artifacts: peer-reviewed article on Autism identification, stigma, and racial bias

Karine told the group:

The system always tells you, "Hey, you're only one warrior, you can't do it." I mean...I can find this guy on the ResearchGate and send him private messages and he's going to reply to me. Because I'm going to be following until I'm not going to get what I want...when I come to some meeting, I'm like, "You know in the articles this, this, this, which was cited in this journal, impact factor of this journal..." Anyways the problem with the system you always have to have the facts and data.

Karine had learned that decisions surrounding children's disability identification and early educational placement get made based on facts and data. As Karine advocated for her child's strengths to be seen and his needs to be met, she strategically leveraged ResearchGate—a social networking website for researchers—to position herself as competent, identifying and sharing research-based articles with educational decision-makers. She pragmatically used these studies to legitimate her stance regarding inclusive education, even as she critiqued the system's over-reliance on facts and data (and under-reliance on lived experience) as a means for decision-making.

June talked about how she had learned to protect her two children from being excluded and punished by going above and beyond expectations for parent participation. After listing countless ways that she did this, including volunteering, arriving to meetings early, and creating her own early educational materials at home, June explained:

I want to pave the way with staff and teachers...so if my children have done something wrong, you go, "Oh, that's the parent that volunteers. We can talk to her.".... I want

[educators] to know [my children are] coming from a household that takes education seriously. That if there is a problem, please, I [hope I] have done enough for you talk to me...but it's just that extra, extra....it's exhausting to do that extra just so they're not labeled. Or just so they don't get expelled.

For June, going above and beyond was a way of defending her young children's right to exist in an exclusionary system stacked against them. That is, even as June put in additional labor to establish trust with educators and create a safety net for her children, she recognized the unsustainability of her efforts to prove she was more-than-competent. Indeed, as June described, this extra burden was wholly exhausting, and one none of the Mothers should be carrying. Across our conversations, Mothers helped us see how they had learned to deliberately push back on deficit framings of themselves and their children as a matter of necessity. As Mothers advocated for their children's inclusion into early childhood settings, they did so with sociopolitical consciousness, articulating how the dominant constructions of competence within the system perpetuate harm.

Dreaming Beyond the Status Quo

Even as they worked to address tangible concerns for their children's participation within the current early educational system, Mothers shared dreams beyond inclusion into the status quo. Kim insisted that this dreaming about the future meant educators must not ignore structures that they operate within. She shared: “[I need his educators to] look at institutionalized racism...look at ableism....I had to go research this myself as a parent, looking at eugenics. Does anybody talk about eugenics? None of his [educators] know anything about eugenics.” Indeed, for Kim and several of the Mothers in our study, dreaming about justice meant accounting for the harm that ableism and racism have co-created throughout history – and specifically recognizing

how special education carries forward this history of eugenics through intervening on children. For Kim, naming this history served as a way to refuse to reproduce it.

Stating this harm also opened space for Mothers to share desires for what their children deserved but had not yet experienced in early childhood education. For example, Maia explained:

Education has traditionally been this thing that we've like herded white women to indoctrinate our children in how to go and function in a settler colonial society. I feel like if we took all the policies and the cultural tendencies of white supremacy....perfectionism, paternalism, fear of open conflict....if we looked through the policy and unpacked it to where...you don't have to worship the rules and there's some flexibility... to where [he's] not having to fit into a box in order to get [what he needs].

Here, Maia highlighted the ways racism and settler colonialism show up in early childhood policy as a way to dream beyond the present. Specifically, she referenced the characteristics of white supremacy culture (Jones & Okun, 2001), imagining how unearthing these characteristics within early childhood policy might allow the construction of an open, responsive system that would allow her child to be who he is, while knowing that if she or her child asked for supports, their needs would be met.

Lua further expanded on the notion of children's agency, explaining what she was seeking in early childhood systems by reading a post about raising children respectfully that she had found on Facebook (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Lua's artifact: Facebook post

Lua went on:

I guess that's what I want...inclusion would be great, but what does that even mean because [my child's] still going to be treated like shit wherever he goes? I'm still treated like shit a lot of times, so I need more than whatever inclusion is. I need full-on acceptance, thriving.

Lua dreamed of an early childhood education that respects children's agency and dismantles racial-ability hierarchies. For Lua, inclusion into a system that continues to uphold norms of whiteness and ability would never be about authentic respect and care for her child. Instead, she argued for the need to radically shift the system in ways that interrogate the presumption of adult authority and recognize her child's ways of being as valuable. Annissa agreed, adding, "The same things we're asking for our kids, would be best applied to all children. The compassion, the

understanding, the patience. Treat them like kids...[knowing] they aren't responsible for everything... justice for sure looks like that.” In the context of a system that locates deficit within their children and funnels them out of educational settings, Annessa explicated her desire for multiply-marginalized children to be treated *as children* who have needs, questions, and insights, instead of asking them to carry the blame for the structural ableism-racism they experience.

June used an expandable sphere (one of her children’s toys) to illustrate her dreams for early childhood (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. June’s artifact: Expandable sphere

As she opened the sphere, June said she wanted her children to know, “Right now you're on the inside, growing. And all the adults are on the outside with their hands linked together. Taking care of you. Protecting you.” June’s emphasis on adults working together to protect and care for

her children did not discount their agency. Instead, she contended that her children— often positioned as incompetent and outside the bounds of childhood— deserved space and the freedom to imagine themselves as children too. Expanding on June’s example, Ana stated, “So it's not that we want to be special, the “special education,” and it's not that a typical kid is the pure model. It's like, there is something to offer from our kids to other kids.” Here, Ana contested the static constructions of “disabled” and “nondisabled,” which position her child as always in need. Instead, she offered that multiply-marginalized children have insights and valuable perspectives to share. Like June and Ana, many of the Mothers we spoke with longed for early childhood systems that would allow their children to be their full selves in early learning, as they build relationships and connections they want and need.

Discussion

In our study, Mothers viewed early childhood education in Washington state as a normalizing system that upheld whiteness and narrow notions of competency. Mothers in our study critiqued how their children were measured against white, nondisabled norms in schools, even as toddlers. From their perspective, such a system rendered Children of Color with disability labels as less human and worthy of exclusion and punishment from the moment they begin school. Specifically, they described how systems perpetuated deficit-views of their children (in comparison to normativity) through (a) schooling practices that stressed assimilation to adult expectations; (b) institutionalized processes that emphasized fixing their children; and (c) educational exclusion. In the context of these dehumanizing practices, Mothers’ methods of resistance were fraught, as they sought to resist deficit framings of their children through a variety of means (i.e., volunteering, educating themselves, building community with other

Mothers), while simultaneously advocating for their children's inclusion in a system they did not fully believe in.

Much of the dominant discourse surrounding Mothers of young children with disabilities focuses on Mothers needing support in the context of educational decision-making, as they grieve their child's disability (Lalvani, 2015). In our study, Mothers of Color *were* grieving, but their grief was an expression of political clarity surrounding an educational system that positioned their children as unworthy of childhood. Skrtic (1991) highlighted how educational organizations have long been rooted in a functionalist view of educational practices as "objective, inherently orderly, and rational" (p.152), and that legitimize the labeling and exclusion of children with disabilities. Mothers in our study offered counter narratives to this organizational logic, arguing that educational systems- as socio-political projects- can re-orient toward teaching and learning in solidarity with multiply-marginalized children. From their perspectives, early education systems must explicitly reject the prevailing notion that there is ever such a thing as a "throwaway person" (Shalaby, 2020). By decentering educator expertise and considering what educators stand to learn through reciprocal relationships with multiply-marginalized children and their families, Mothers imagined early education as networks of care.

Implications

Implications from these findings are numerous. In this section we focus on three interrelated implications in relation to teaching and learning in early childhood. First, Mothers in our study were clear that early educators and leaders must eradicate policies and practices that allow early childhood systems to label and exclude children for whom the system does not work (Skrtic, 1991) - including early learning placements and policies that allow young Children of

Color with disabilities to be segregated by ability, suspended, expelled, or arrested.

Simultaneously, early educators and leaders can account for the ways schooling perpetuates harm as a way to move beyond it. Drawing on the theoretical tools of DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013), early educators and leaders can reckon with histories of oppression -- including histories of eugenics and scientific racism (Baynton, 2001)-- that carry forward oppressive constructions of “competence” in early childhood. By critically examining how racism and ableism co-constitute narrow notions of competence (in thinking, learning, and behavior) through various elements of early education systems (i.e., developmental guidelines, early learning standards, curricular materials, placement decisions, environmental arrangements; Author1, 2021b), educators and leaders can continuously recognize and contest normative policies and practices that perpetuate the ranking, categorizing, and pathologization of young Children of Color (Author1, 2019).

Second, Mothers insisted that early childhood policies and practices be rooted in authentic love and respect for their children. Though early education is often understood as a place of care, to authentically *enact* care, early education can radically re-imagine competence through the lens of interdependence (Annamma & Handy, 2021). That is, educators and leaders must dismantle the myth that any learner moves through the world without support (Brown, 2012) - and instead frame young children, educators, and knowledge itself as interrelated, supportive entities. Doing so requires that educators and leaders recognize multiply-marginalized children’s (and their families’) capacities (Biklen and Burke, 2006) by valuing the fullness of their lives, viewing their ways of being and knowing as legitimate. Moving values for interdependence into classroom management means emphasizing care (vs. control) and accountability to community (vs. authority) through restorative and healing centered practices

(Shalaby, 2020). Translating care to curriculum and pedagogy, leaders and early educators must resist standardized curricular interventionist approaches aimed at “fixing” young children’s thinking, learning, or behavior (Author1, 2021b), and instead draw on asset based pedagogies (e.g., Paris & Alim, 2014), demand pluralism both in what is learned and in forms of participation (Waitoller & Thorius, 2019), and cultivate multiply-marginalized children’s joy as well as resistance to injustice in their worlds (Annamma & Morrison, 2018).

Finally, any systemic change in early childhood must take place in coordination with Families of Color who have young children with disability labels. Doing so means early childhood systems must fundamentally reframe the ways multiply-marginalized families might participate in change to shift material realities. In our study, Mothers of Color narrated how they strategically resisted aspects of current early educational systems - including institutional expectations around parental engagement in their children’s educations - with socio-political consciousness. Moreover, many of the Mothers we spoke with shared how they found strength and resistance strategies in the context of community-based parent organizations. Levering the collective wisdom of families within parent organizing groups (Ishimaru, 2018) can be a powerful catalyst for dismantling ableism and racism in early childhood systems. Moving beyond extant models of parent involvement in or compliance with the status quo (Hong, 2020), Families of Color can be positioned as educational leaders, whose knowledge and insights into the goals of early learning can support socio-political change-making.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how Mothers of Color who have young children with disabilities made meaning of underlying constitutions of competence within schools and how they conceptualize possibility for justice in early childhood. Using DisCrit and

revolutionary mothering, our analysis revealed ways Mothers named and strategically resisted harmful notions of “competence” that positioned their children as outside the bounds of childhood, as well as their dreams of an early education system rooted in authentic care. We end this paper where we began, with the story of Jaleel-- a young Black child with a disability who was isolated and punished in school without his Mother’s knowledge, based on his perceived deviance from socio-emotional competence. We urge readers to consider how the perspectives of the Mothers in our study might be leveraged to create a more loving story for Jaleel and his Mother in his early education, one that decenters educator expertise and recenters Jaleel’s and his Mother’s agency, positioning Jaleel as a child within a learning community that recognizes the fullness of his life.

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[1] We believe language can be a tool for resisting structural racism. Following Gotanda (1991), instead of privileging “white” and “whiteness” (and the long history of racial domination they represent) with a capital letter, we consciously leave these terms in lower case. Like Kohli (2019), we intentionally capitalize Black, Indigenous, Latina/x, Asian, Pacific Islander, Multiracial and Children/Mothers of Color. This is not meant to minimize or erase the unique struggles of specific communities but to signify patterns of racial subjugation and resistance.