Teachers "Committed to a Livable Future": Cultivating Womanist Anti-Carceral Praxis in Early Care and Education Settings

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Abstract

Drawing from Audre Lorde's commitment to a "livable future," this article introduces womanist anti-carceral praxis and describes how early care and education teachers, scholars, and teacher educators may actualize their commitments to a livable future by embodying nine dispositions of womanist anti-carceral praxis. Bridging anti-carceral feminism and womanism, womanist anti-carceral praxis is rooted in Black women's intellectual and theological work, everyday experiences, and everyday methods of activism and problem-solving extended to ending all forms of oppression, enclosure, and isolation. This approach (re)conceptualizes classroom practices by addressing investments, practices, policies, and technologies anchored in carceral logics—the assumptions, actions, materials, and structures of surveillance, exclusion, and punishment. After describing the constitutive frameworks of anti-carceral feminism and womanism, the article concludes with prompts for teachers' reflections and a discussion of implications toward hopeful possibilities for early care and education.

Keywords*:* womanism, anti-carceral, school punishment, Black children

Introduction

In September 2019, Kaia Rolle, a six-year-old Black girl, was handcuffed, arrested, and transported in a police car from her elementary school to a juvenile detention facility in Orlando, Florida (Sonnenberg, 2024; Zaveri, 2020). There, she was fingerprinted, had a mugshot taken, and was charged with misdemeanor battery by local police. These events occurred after Kaia had a "tantrum"[1] in her first grade classroom. Media attention and legal advocacy elevated Kaia's story, sparking Florida's Kaia Rolle Act. Effective July 1, 2021, the Act prohibits a child's custody, arrest, charge, or adjudication for delinquency or violation of the law before the age of seven years old, unless the child commits a forcible felony (Florida Senate, 2021). Despite the Kaia Rolle Act and ongoing advocacy, school policing remains fundamentally intact in Florida and throughout the nation (Sonnenberg, 2024).

Five decades of research have demonstrated the consistent, disproportionate, and adverse effects of school punishment[2] on Black students (e.g., Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2018). While Kaia's example may seem exceptional, it is in fact emblematic of a punitive system codified in law and policy to reinforce the violent subjugation of Black people and other structurally marginalized communities

[1] "Tantrums," also known as "temper tantrums," are defined as "sudden and explosive…outbursts of emotion that occur throughout toddlerhood and early childhood" (Giesbrecht et al., 2010, pp. 478-479). Tantrums are common during early development. An estimated 70 percent of children aged 1-2 have tantrums (Potegal & Davidson, 2003) and the highest incidence of tantrums occurs among 75.3 percent of children aged 3-5 (Bhatia et al., 1990). In their analysis of 335 parent reports about children's tantrums, Potegal and Davidson (2003) found that tantrums occurred once per day, on average, had a median duration of 3 minutes, and commonly included crying and hitting. Note that in Kaia's experience, her emotions and behaviors were criminalized, not normalized.

[2] I use the term "school punishment" to describe school-administered discipline (e.g., suspension, expulsion, corporal punishment, arrests) and to indicate the context of punitive investments, policies, and practices in schools.

(Gilmore, 2007; Hinton, 2016; Kaufman, 2020). In an anti-Black carceral state, Black children's and youth's encounters with police are empirically adverse and life-threatening (Del Toro et al., 2019; Farkas et al., 2022; Jindal et al., 2022; Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019).

Learning from Audre Lorde's Commitment to a "Livable Future"

Audre Lorde (2007 [1984]) confronts the consequence of raising her Black child in an aggressively unlivable society where racism, White supremacy, sexism, heteropatriarchy, and other systems of power and oppression structure their experiences as a Black lesbian family. Lorde reflects on her experiences as her Black son's parent, confiding that "[r]aising Black children…in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon is perilous and chancy" (p. 74). Rather than acquiesce, Lorde insists, "As a Black woman committed to a livable future, and as a mother loving and raising a boy who will become a man, I must examine all my possibilities of being within such a destructive system" (p. 74). Lorde asserts that the most important lesson that she hopes to teach her child is to be guided by the "voice from within himself, rather than…those raucous, persuasive, or threatening voices from outside, pressuring him to be what the world wants him to be" (p. 77).

Lorde's essay is sensitizing and motivating: as early care and education (ECE) teachers, scholars, and teacher educators, what are our responsibilities and commitments to Black children's livable futures? Commitment to a livable future is a commitment to Black aliveness (Quashie, 2021) in a society where Black children like Kaia Rolle are cast as "troublemakers" (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015) and denigrated as nonhuman (Goff et al., 2008; Goff et al., 2014). Black children's and intersectionally diverse children's wellbeing require ECE teachers to cultivate praxis "committed to a livable future," as Lorde affirms. It is worth examining our "possibilities of being" as we contend with, rage against, and transform systems designed for Black dehumanization, enclosure, and unlivability. Indeed, developmental science and early education projects in the 20th century were rationalized as interventions on so-called Black cultural "disadvantage" (Beatty, 2012). Today, ECE teachers are critically positioned to confront harmful myths, stereotypes, and discrimination that reproduce ideas of cultural inferiority. As such, teaching philosophies and practices are sorely needed to intervene on "those raucous, persuasive, or threatening voices from the outside" that racialize childhood innocence (Bernstein, 2011) and dehumanize, adultify, and criminalize Black children. To actualize Lorde's commitment to a livable future amid ongoing sociopolitical injustices in the United States and globally, ECE teachers, scholars, and teacher educators must refuse to reproduce harm and enclosure, and simultaneously, must foster political acumen, imagination, and action.

In this article, I introduce and describe womanist anti-carceral praxis, one approach toward this objective that confronts dimensions of anti-Black carcerality in ECE and advances toward a livable future. This approach (re)conceptualizes classroom practices by addressing investments, practices, policies, and technologies anchored in carceral logics—the assumptions, actions, materials, and structures of surveillance, exclusion, and punishment. In the sections that follow, I situate my positionality and commitments in this work, review the theoretical frameworks that underpin my analysis, and describe anti-carceral feminism and womanism. Then, blending the two aforementioned frameworks, I introduce nine dispositions of womanist anti-carceral praxis. I conclude by discussing implications for teachers and teacher educators.

Researcher Positionality

In my commitment to a livable future, I learn from and center Black and African American studies, cultural theory, and practices and projects that advance the wellbeing

of Black children, intersectionally diverse children, and the important others in their lives. I am a White cis-woman who was educated in California public and private schools from elementary to higher education. My family context, along with an undergraduate work-study job at a public elementary school, led me to study psychology and infant mental health. Later, ignited by my work as a preschool teacher, as a clinical trainee in preschools, and as a research assistant on early learning studies, I pursued a career in research and academia to address mechanisms of systematic exclusion in education. I do not assume a neutral position in this work: my long-term goal is to advance a system of carceral abolitionist education and to ensure that schools are safe, loving, socially relevant and politically conscious institutions. Currently, I live in California's San Francisco Bay Area where I am an early career teacher-scholar at a private Jesuit university that has an explicit social justice focus.

Theoretical Perspectives

My thinking and research for this project are grounded in a Foucauldian analysis of the carceral continuum and critical race perspectives that explain the salience and specificity of anti-Black racialized injustice in education and in society. The concept of the carceral continuum explains how carceral logics extend beyond explicitly punitive institutions (e.g., prisons, jails) throughout all facets of society (Foucault, 1977). Carceral logics—the assumptions, actions, materials, and structures anchored in surveillance, exclusion, and punishment—are replicated and reinforced through educational investments, policies, practices, and technologies. Meiners (2017) asserts that "dismantling the carceral state in our classrooms and communities requires not only shrinking the footprint of policing in our schools and communities but also stepping back for a fresh theorizing of the artifact of the child" (p. 124). Building on Meiners' demonstration that the category of the child is malleable and racialized, I draw from Dumas & Nelson's (2016) assertion that Black childhoods are unimagined and unimaginable. Consequently, Black childhood and adolescence are paradoxically hypervisible and invisible, and "Black suffering" is normalized in education (Dumas, 2014). In Dumas's analysis, Black suffering is not deemed legitimate because the permanence of racism constructs it as natural and inconsequential. Dumas & Nelson (2016) contend that dehumanization—not prejudice—provides a logic to explain why Black children are framed as undeserving of emotional and moral recognition in schools.

Additionally, I draw from Dumas & ross's (2016) conceptualization of BlackCrit to account for the pervasive and permanent nature of anti-Black racism in education. BlackCrit is framed by three key ideas. The first idea is that anti-Blackness is endemic and central to every facet of society and social life. ross specifies that the use of "anti-Blackness" is not only meant to signal racism against Black people but also to "signal the broader antagonistic relationship between blackness and the possibility of humanity" (p. 3). The second idea holds that Blackness and the neoliberal multicultural imagination exist in tension. These notions reflect what Shange (2019) calls the "progressive dystopia," the suturing of liberal and neoliberal formulations of multiculturalism that (re)produce harms against Black people. Finally, the third idea framing BlackCrit is action-oriented: BlackCrit should "create space for Black liberatory fantasy and resist a revisionist history" (ross, 2019, p. 3).

These critical perspectives challenge the idea that carceral intervention in education is race-neutral, and explain how investments, policies, practices, and technologies anchored in carceral logics are entangled with, and reproduce, unlivable anti-Black racism in education (see Ladson-Billings, 2023).

Carceral-Educational Entanglements

The relationship between carceral and educational institutions is prototypically conceived of as the "school-to-prison pipeline." The school-to-prison pipeline is a concept that links school-based punishment and criminalization through a direct pathway from educational settings to carceral contexts (e.g., prisons, jails, juvenile incarceration). Studies using multivariate analyses demonstrate that out-of-school suspension and expulsion are associated with students' likelihood for varied negative developmental outcomes, including contact with the carceral system, regardless of students' behavioral and demographic characteristics (Skiba et al., 2014). A subject of research, policy, and practice interventions that address educational exclusion and aim to curb discipline disparities across the preK-12 spectrum (Gregory et al., 2010), the pipeline concept treats educational and carceral institutions as separate entities. However, there is considerable evidence to indicate that schools are carceral institutions in their own right, fortified by investments, personnel, technologies, practices, and structures dedicated to surveillance, punishment, and exclusion (e.g., Kupchik, 2010; Meiners, 2011; Rodríguez, 2010). Meiners' (2011) concept of the school-to-prison nexus, Morris's (2016) concept of school-confinement pathways, and McMillian & Bryan's (2025) concept of educational enclosures more closely reflect the complex sociopolitical conditions and material realities of carceral-educational entanglements compared to a linear school-prison pipeline.

To illustrate how educational and carceral institutions are enmeshed and co-constitutive, it is useful to examine educational investments, policies, practices, and technologies anchored in carceral logics. Examples include expanding public funding for school police forces, implementing zero tolerance policies, criminalizing students and families in truancy court, policing families through child welfare and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and state expansion of co-located alternative schools and juvenile detention facilities. In the classroom and on campus, practices such as line-up, search and seizure of personal property, physical seclusion and restraint, corporal punishment, and exclusionary discipline (e.g., office referral, suspension, expulsion) animate carceral logics in schools. Technologies of carceral logics include, for example, digital and physical surveillance tools (e.g., metal detectors, security cameras) and contracts with private security, local police, and social workers.

Apart from involvement with school police, local police, and courts, expulsion is the most severe punitive action that an educational institution can take against students, resulting in permanent exclusion from any educational programming in the school system, including in ECE settings where national expulsion rates were documented as 3.2 times the rate for K-12 settings (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). In-school and out-of-school suspensions from ECE and K-12 settings are slightly less severe, as they require temporary exclusion, ranging from days to weeks, before a student can return to their classroom or educational program (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Among the adverse consequences of school punishment, Losen & Whitaker (2018) estimate that in the 2015-2016 academic year, students in United States public schools lost 11 million days of learning due to suspensions, which disproportionately impacted Black, Native American, and disabled students. Notably, a "discipline gap" has been documented since the 1970's (Gregory et al., 2010; Losen et al., 2015), characterized by "ubiquitous racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline" (Skiba et al., 2011, p. 85). Black, Latinx, American Indian/Native Alaskan, disabled, and English-learner students are consistently and disproportionately punished compared to their counterparts in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, 2021, 2023), and LGBTQ+ students, especially girls, experience school punishment at disproportionate rates (Samimi et al., 2024). Recently, Flores & Losen's (2025) statewide longitudinal study in California indicated that suspensions persistently occurred at high and disparate rates for Black and American Indian students, and for students who are disabled, unhoused, or in the foster care system—often for

minor infractions. This evidence suggests that status quo, race-neutral reform and accountability efforts are insufficient in addressing longstanding and persistent patterns of school punishment (Skiba, 2015).

Anti-Carceral Feminism

Given the entangled carceral-educational system and the insufficiency of existing interventions, I review anti-carceral feminist approaches as a first step in thinking about how ECE teachers may actualize Lorde's commitment to a livable future and create hope and sanctuary in their classrooms without relying on unlivable, dehumanizing, anti-Black carceral policies, practices, and technologies.

As background, the anti-carceral feminist movement emerged in response to "carceral feminism," a term that Bernstein (2007) developed to explain "a drift from the welfare state to the carceral state as the enforcement apparatus for feminist goals" (p. 143), particularly in relation to issues under the heading of gender violence (e.g., sex trafficking). Bernstein (2010) demonstrates how carceral feminism holds wide appeal in an "alliance with neoliberal consumer politics and a militarized state apparatus that utilizes claims of a particular white, middle-class model of Western gender and sexual superiority in achieving its goals" (p. 66). As a result, carceral feminist approaches exacerbate social inequalities by investing in the carceral system and its attendant mechanisms (e.g., police, prosecutors, prisons), which target and harm structurally marginalized communities (Gruber, 2020; Kim, 2018). As Gruber (2020) details, a prevailing rationale is that

> …criminalization is "doing something" to produce justice for women. However, the criminal system generally punishes the poor and the powerless and is particularly impotent to dismantle entrenched power structures. Understanding that policing, prosecution, and punishment are largely fixed institutions, with embedded authoritarian and racialized features, shatters the illusion that throwing criminal law at the gender issue du jour is an exercise in gender justice. (p. 198)

Counter to carceral feminism and a relatively recent intervention, anti-carceral feminism responds to gender-based oppression, harm, control, and violence with explicit opposition to the carceral state. Anti-carceral feminism developed through "the experiences, analyses, and actions of people of color," with core values and practices that are transformative and community-focused (Kim, 2019, p. 313). Anti-carceral feminist approaches amplify critical accounts, expertise, and actions of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people toward gender justice, and altogether resist a hegemonic view of a "singular 'feminist movement'" by recognizing diversity of feminist histories and challenging the "master narrative" through coalitional and intersectional forms of organizing and thinking (Carlton & Russell, 2018, p. 15).

There are three features of anti-carceral feminist values and practices that underscore the ECE praxis approach that I introduce in this article: first, a recognition that interpersonal violence is rooted in and inseparable from systems of oppression; second, an understanding that violence is rooted in and perpetuated by the carceral state, and thus, interventions should be localized and operate outside institutions and mechanisms of the carceral state; and third, a belief that communities are the heart of liberatory futures (Kim, 2019). Kim (2019) affirms, "As many of us engaged within these struggles know, the way forward is not always clear and is almost never easy" (p. 313). Feminist anti-carceral approaches extend beyond the prison to account for the sociopolitical, economic, environmental, and other interlocking power relations that reproduce carceral violence. Thus, feminist anti-carceral movements "must be positioned within a broader programme

of social justice activism and advocacy that aims to dismantle intersecting systems of oppression and eliminate structural inequalities" (Carlton & Russell, 2018, p. 13).

Further, anti-carceral feminist approaches simultaneously resist gender violence and the carceral state through community-based processes of restorative and transformative justice. Importantly, the terminology of "restorative" justice suggests returning to "neoliberal conditions of welfare retrenchment and mass incarceration," while "transformative" justice "requires moving beyond" these conditions (Kim, 2018, p. 227). Kim's conclusion illuminates possibilities for ECE teachers to begin to think about bringing anti-carceral approaches into their praxis toward livable futures:

> Approaches that support storytelling and the creation of reparative narratives can be inclusive of the diverse ways in which people learn and communicate. In the move from carceral feminism to transformative justice, it has been the most marginalized and vulnerable that have provided leadership pressing for reimagined anti-violence goals and liberatory practices grounded deep within embattled communities. (p. 230)

The context, values, and goals of the anti-carceral feminist movement are informative for ECE teachers, scholars, and teacher educators as we reflect on the entanglement of carceral and educational systems and reconstitute our commitments through Lorde's notion of a livable future. Specifically, anti-carceral feminist approaches suggest routes for addressing harm and fostering transformation in ECE without replicating or depending upon carceral investments, policies, practices, and technologies in education. Notably, anti-carceral feminism responds to gender violence without invoking or strengthening the carceral state. Related but distinct, womanist methods aim to eradicate injustices across all axes of oppression, rather than gender-based oppression or race-gender intersectional oppression alone, which are the concerns of feminist, Black feminist, and women-of-color feminist movements (Phillips, 2006).

Womanism

While feminism is acutely concerned with gender justice, womanism extends beyond issues of gender, sexism, and equality between the sexes (Cannon, 1995; Phillips, 2006). Womanism emerged in theological, academic, and popular lexicons during a period deeply influenced by second wave feminism and women's movements in the global context. This was also a time of reflection upon and critique of how women of color were not centered in the (White) women's movement during the 1960's and 1970's. In the mid-1980's, scholars in theology, literature, and history began to use womanist terminology and explore the implications of womanism. During the decade, womanist scholarship grew across diverse fields of study including film and theater studies, psychology, education, anthropology, communication studies, social work, nursing, gender studies, and Africana studies (Phillips, 2006).

A preeminent scholar in the areas of womanism and womanist studies, Phillips (2006) explains that a womanist is "triply concerned with herself, other Black women, and the entire Black race…—but also all humanity, showing an ever-expanding and ultimately universal arc of political concern, empathy, and activism" (p. xxiii). According to Phillips,

> the central organizing principle of womanism (if it can be said that there is one) is the absolute necessity of speaking from and about one's own experiential location and not to or about someone else's…Black women's scholarship does not parade as universal, but rather it

> emanates from a point of acute authenticity and invites others to participate in a similar, equally authentic, process. (p. 88)

Through a synthesis of wide-ranging womanist works, Phillips distills five overarching characteristics of womanism. First, womanism is *anti-oppressionist*, linking gross differences in power and resources to dehumanization and the undermining of individual and collective wellbeing. Second, womanism is *vernacular*, meaning "the soul of womanism is grassroots, identified with the masses of humanity" (p. xxiv), concerned with the everyday experiences and lives of people united by common concerns. Womanists engage in varied actions in everyday life, and the variation of actions is not a problem but a strength. Phillips describes that "'start where you are' might be the womanist credo, and 'one step forward' is the standard for progress," suggesting there is no prerequisite criteria for womanist actions for social change (p. xxv). Third, womanism is *nonideological*. Instead of creating division, womanism "is about building structures of inclusiveness and positive interrelationship from anywhere in its network" (p. xxv). Further, womanism welcomes paradox, differences, and tension, accommodating "disagreement, conflict, and anger simultaneously with agreement, affinity, and love" (p. xxv). Fourth, womanism is *communitarian*, concerned with community welfare and collective wellbeing as goals of social change. Fifth, womanism is *spiritualized*, reflecting upon and openly acknowledging a spiritual-transcendental realm where human life, all living things, and the material world are connected.

Womanist Pedagogy

A dynamic approach, womanism holds critical implications for teaching and learning. Scholars have explored how womanist pedagogy bridges "the academic and the everyday" (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995, p. 86) in a variety of educational contexts. For example, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) synthesizes three dimensions of womanist pedagogy. First, womanist pedagogy embodies maternal forms of caring for and protecting students. Maternal care and protection are not a single person's or gender's role, as "African-American teachers regarded mothering broadly as a community responsibility" (p. 284). Beauboeuf-Lafontant further distinguishes that,

> If black women exemplars are truly models of the types of teachers that our students need, then recognizing a womanist orientation to teaching compels us to reconsider several assumptions we make about women, caring, and education…Once we begin to see caring and mothering in larger, sociohistorical realms, we can recognize how in sharing knowledge we can also share power. (p. 291)

Second, womanist pedagogy is politically conscious. Womanist teachers are "political beings who make constant parallels between schooling and society, school practices and social reality" (p. 285) and they interpret racism and other injustices as "simultaneously social and educational problems" (p. 286). Third, womanist pedagogy maintains an ethical orientation to risk rooted in interdependence and mutual responsibility.

Additionally, Sheared (1994) identifies qualities of womanist pedagogy in adult and continuing education contexts. While these contexts are not equivalent to ECE settings, Sheared's description of womanist pedagogy generates insights about opportunities to disrupt normative assumptions, power relations, and knowledge systems that dominate ECE. Sheared articulates that womanist pedagogy is a critical way to "give voice to political, economic, and social life stories, experiences, cultures, and histories that have been excluded from the educational mainstream" (p. 270). Womanist instructional practice emerges from and responds to the erasure and exclusion of intersectional perspectives, and positions Black women's intellectual knowledge production and actions as dominant discourse. Sheared distinguishes four dimensions of womanist

pedagogy: knowledge is grounded in subjectivity and experiences; perspective and context matter; mutuality, empathy, and trust are essential for learning; and personal accountability and responsibility for learning are shared among everyone. Womanist pedagogy holds that the complexity of identity "must be acknowledged and examined for individuals to be recognized in their fullness as interconnected human beings" (p. 272).

Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) and Sheared's (1994) complementary descriptions of womanist pedagogy are instructive for ECE teachers who are committed to a livable future. In a system of education where justice appears anchored in anti-Black carcerality, womanist pedagogy takes a critical, Black-centered, relational approach to education and social justice as interconnected projects.

Committed to a Livable Future: Toward Womanist Anti-Carceral Praxis

Blending philosophies, characteristics, and actions of anti-carceral feminism and womanism, womanist anti-carceral praxis activates race- and power-conscious (re)conceptualizations of ECE to ensure that Black children and intersectionally diverse children "do more than survive" (Love, 2019). Womanist anti-carceral praxis is anchored in Black women's intellectual and theological work, everyday experiences, and everyday methods of activism and problem-solving extended to ending all forms of oppression, enclosure, and isolation; to divesting from carceral logics; to uplifting community-based and transformative solutions; and to restorying possibilities for teaching and learning. ECE teachers, scholars, and teacher educators may actualize their commitments to a livable future by embodying nine dispositions of womanist anti-carceral praxis. These nine dispositions result from my synthesis of anti-carceral feminist approaches, womanist methods of social transformation, and womanist pedagogy toward Lorde's imperative of a livable future. I enumerate each disposition below, offering a brief description and prompts for reflection and discussion:

1. Womanist anti-carceral praxis is *relational*. Teachers prioritize ethical relations between themselves, children, families, community members, and more-than-human others across all teaching practices. Praxis rooted in relationality counters the dehumanization that frames Black children as undeserving of emotional and moral recognition in schools (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Supportive relationships mitigate school punishment and enhance educational opportunities (e.g., Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Welsh, 2024), effects that may be strengthened by interventions designed to promote empathy and understanding of children's backgrounds (Gilliam et al., 2016; Okonofua et al., 2016). Please consider reflecting and discussing: *Who/what are my relations? What dynamics of othering and belonging have I observed in my classroom or at my school? How do I cultivate authentic, conscientious relationships with children, families, and colleagues?*

2. Womanist anti-carceral praxis is *race-conscious*. Teachers understand that race is a socially constructed idea that has structural and material consequences. They refuse race-evasive discourses that simultaneously undermine social justice and reassert the superiority of Whiteness in institutions, structures, and relations. This disposition is responsive to children's experiences witnessing, living, and meaning-making about racialization and racism in society. Rather than assume that racism and racial injustice are too complex or inappropriate for children, this disposition uplifts a womanist orientation that directly acknowledges racism and other injustices as social and educational problems that affect children's lives and livable futures. Please consider reflecting and discussing: *What is my understanding of race as a socially constructed idea?*

To what extent do I understand the salience of race and racism in my own life, and in the lives of the children, families, and colleagues I work with?

3. Womanist anti-carceral praxis is *politically conscious*. To be clear, praxis rooted in political consciousness does not reflect a political agenda. Rather, this disposition understands that "no education is politically neutral" (hooks, 1994, p. 37): teaching and schooling are socially important and politically relevant projects. Thus, teachers interpret children, families, and schools as situated within sociopolitical structures of power and oppression. Please consider reflecting and discussing: *What is my understanding of teaching as a political act, of ECE as a political project? To what extent do I understand my teaching as consequential for society? How do I evaluate and encounter the political environment around the children I teach?*

4. Womanist anti-carceral praxis is *anti-oppressive*. Teachers explicitly reject and resist practices, policies, and technologies that reinscribe racism, carcerality, (hetero)sexism, ableism, classism, adultism, and other systems of oppression within their classrooms, interactions with students and families, and collaborations with colleagues. This disposition bridges the anti-carceral feminist orientation to activism and advocacy that addresses structural inequalities and intersecting systems of oppression (Carlton & Russell, 2018) and womanist analysis of gross differences in power and resources that undermine individual and collective wellbeing (Phillips, 2006). Please consider reflecting and discussing: *How does power function in my classroom, school, and community? Who/what has power and authority? How am I (dis)advantaged in relation to interlocking structures of power (e.g., racism and White supremacy, ableism, cis-heteropatriarchy and sexism, classism, ageism)? What can I do to make my curriculum and pedagogy conscious of systems of oppression? What strategies do I/might I use to reorganize power in my classroom, school, and community?*

5. Womanist anti-carceral praxis is *community-centered*. Boutte & Bryan (2019) urge ECE teachers to be "'at home' on the street corners, barrios, churches, mosques, kitchens, porches, and stoops of people and communities so that our work more accurately reflects students' concerns and interests" (p. 241). Teachers recognize the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human relations, and understand the salience of space, place, and identity as key dimensions of teaching and learning. This disposition extends from community-centered anti-carceral feminist approaches (Kim, 2019) and a womanist concern with community welfare and collective wellbeing as the goals of social change (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Phillips, 2006). Please consider reflecting and discussing: *What issues are affecting my ECE community (e.g., educators, children and families, neighboring community members)? How is my school or classroom in relation with community members—can these relations be established or strengthened? What would make it possible for my curriculum to include community organizations in collaborations or partnerships? How do I incorporate local stories, spaces, and places in my pedagogy?*

6. Womanist anti-carceral praxis locates *expertise within* individuals and communities. Teachers intentionally seek cultural, ancestral, place-based, and other forms of knowledge generally excluded from ECE norms or standards. Further, teachers assume positions as learners and co-creators of meaning *with* children and families. This praxis corresponds with the anti-carceral feminist approach of centering the stories, experiences, and actions of individuals who are impacted by carceral systems (Carlton & Russell, 2018) and the womanist

orientation toward "speaking from and about one's own experiential location and not to or about someone else's" (Phillips, 2006, p. 88) while simultaneously working to center perspectives and accounts that are frequently subjugated by dominant discourses (Sheared, 1994). Please consider reflecting and discussing: *When does my teaching make space for children and families to be the experts of their lives? How does my teaching make space for lived experience a valued form of knowledge? How are my own experiences sources of wisdom? What can I learn about my own intersectionality as I shift norms of knowledge and power in my classroom?*

7. Womanist anti-carceral praxis is *accessible*. Teachers should closely examine how dynamics of exclusion operate in the classroom and at school, spanning their assumptions and expectations, interpersonal interactions and reactions, curriculum, communication, physical space, and school processes. Embodying the vernacular characteristic of womanism, in particular, this disposition reveals and counters exclusionary, exceptionalist, and essentialist impulses of categorization and othering. Please consider reflecting and discussing: *What official and unofficial ways are children excluded from learning opportunities? What would help me confront exclusion in my contexts? What actions can I take to ensure that my teaching and ways of being are accessible and inclusive? How can I be sure that my efforts for inclusion do not perpetuate cultural erasure or assimilation? When and why do I take space to direct children versus make space for children to direct their own experiences in the classroom?*

8. Womanist anti-carceral praxis is *non-ideological*. Teachers are professionals who work with integrity and affirm the complexity and diversity of children's and families' identities, ideas, and ways of being. Informed by a womanist ethic that welcomes paradox, difference, and tensions, ECE teachers embrace the non-ideological disposition of womanist anti-carceral praxis as an opportunity to build relationships and knowledge through processes that do not rely on or seek sameness. Please consider reflecting and discussing: *How do my classroom physical space, pedagogy, and curriculum include diverse children's and families' identities, ideas, and ways of being? What resources or supports help me navigate topics that may be simultaneously politicized and relevant to children, families, and the school community?*

9. Womanist anti-carceral praxis is *reflective*. Ongoing and every day, teachers rethink, reconceptualize, and reimagine possibilities and opportunities to create abolitionary-otherwise worlds. This important process requires space, resources, and support, which are not assumed to be given and may require advocacy. Please consider reflecting and discussing: *What nourishes my inner peace, hope, and sanctuary? How do I create moments/spaces of peace, hope, and sanctuary for children and families in my classroom/ECE center? What effects do I notice from this practice*? *What resources or supports in my professional and personal world will help me engage in this practice?*

Implications for Teachers and Teacher Educators

Socially responsive and politically conscious educators may already embrace most, if not all, of these dispositions. Relating these nine dispositions as womanist anti-carceral praxis toward Lorde's imperative of a livable future makes epistemological, ontological, and ethical interventions on anti-Black carceral-educational defaults rooted in behaviorism, developmental science, and standards-based curriculum and assessment. Collectively, the dispositions of womanist anti-carceral praxis reconceptualize and interrogate pressures to "manage" children's behaviors or subject children and families to state surveillance via intervention from police or social workers. This process requires

worthy investments in time and emotional labor for reflection and action. As such, teachers and teacher educators may benefit from working within a community of practice model (Buysse et al., 2003) where they reflect, try out, go back, go forth, imagine, and enact womanist anti-carceral praxis collectively in the face of carceral-educational norms.

As empirical research on exclusionary discipline in early education has gained traction, federal guidelines and state, district, and school policies have shifted in recent years to allocate time and funding for professional development to improve ECE quality and reduce or eliminate exclusionary discipline (Davis et al., 2020). Consequently, professional development, consultation, coaching, and training on alternatives to exclusionary discipline have proliferated. Yet, policies and practices that prohibit school arrest or exclusionary discipline, while important on the surface, are insufficient when they fail to undo carceral-educational entanglements that strengthen unlivable, anti-Black carceral logics and naturalize the idea that policing and punishment are equivalent to safety and harm-reduction. Womanist anti-carceral approaches invite educators to reconceptualize their perceptions, ideas, and actions as they work toward a livable future with Black children and intersectionally diverse children and families. Teaching with a womanist anti-carceral approach redresses schooling in ways that nurture children's self-awareness, self-respect, and functional wellbeing by mitigating and eliminating carceral harm from educational opportunities.

Crucially, commitment to a livable future is not a race-neutral or race-evasive endeavor. Preservice and inservice teachers, as well as teacher educators, must actively counter racist, pathologizing, and altogether dangerous logics that subjugate and harm Black children and intersectionally diverse children. In addition, projects that incorporate holistic approaches to health, healing, and collective care are foregrounded by a history of fugitive Black space in education (Bookser, 2024; Nxumalo & ross, 2019). Community-conscious programs and coalitions (e.g., the Abolitionist Teaching Network; the Highlander School in Atlanta, Georgia; Nxumalo, 2019) demonstrate how educators, children, families, and community members may collectively engage in racial and social justice work as ECE work.

Conclusion

The United States has not yet actualized a system of equitable, accessible, high-quality ECE where all children are beloved. What's more, shifting political ideologies have criminalized culturally relevant, justice-oriented pedagogy and jeopardized a swathe of federal educational resources and civil rights protections. Simultaneously, the federal government is actively expanding ICE and investing in infrastructure for immigration detention, deportation, and family separation (Mascaro, 2026), consequential for the ECE community (Enriquez, 2025; Stavely, 2026). Backdropped by a dangerous sociopolitical context of disinvestment and (en)closure, the work of affirming the humanity of Black children and intersectionally diverse children is urgent. Inspired by Lorde's commitment to a livable future, womanist anti-carceral teaching is a commitment to Black aliveness (Quashie, 2021), educational freedom (Love, 2019), and a livable future when Black children like Kaia Rolle are seen "as human beings in and of themselves" and are asked "who they are, what they think, and what they desire in their lives" (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 27).

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