Joy is Resistance: A Decade of Black Lives Matter Activism with Young Children

Jen Bradley
ORCID # 0009-0009-3729-312X

Samuel Gerlach

Reece Mathisen

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The Family as a Site of Resistance

I remember the weather. It was like the gloomiest day on Germantown Avenue. It was cold. And I was 15, and I was leading this march. It was one of the first times I felt as a kid that even with everything going on, you could still have some sort of power. At that moment, I didn't feel like I was a kid. I felt like I was more of an adult, where I had a voice, and I was able to lead something powerful. We got honks from cars as we were walking down the sidewalk, all bundled up because it was 20 degrees and snowing.

-Sam, age 27 (now), age 15 (then)

I remember holding the banner, and I remember that being a super exciting thing, and Sam was an older kid, so it was, like, super cool to be able to hold the banner with him. I felt like I was leading all these people because I knew what we were doing was important. People were showing out for this and showing up for this, and that made me feel important.

-Reece, age 16 (now), age 4 (then)

In December of 2014, a previously unconnected group of Philadelphia parents grew concerned about the lack of opportunities for families and children to protest the non-indictment decision surrounding Eric Garner's killing. Heated protest actions were being held across the city at night and typically with tactics meant for adults. The 'Philly Children's March for Love & Justice' was organized by this group of Philly moms to create a local, family-friendly event to engage children in the growing call for racial justice. On the cold and sleety January day Sam and Reece describe, the march had over seventy people, aged nine months to seventy-five years old. There were Black Lives Matter child-made posters, protest songs, breaking of bread, child-led chants, and even hot cocoa to warm us all up along the route.

As organizers, we quickly realized that in creating the march, we had connected families committed to exploring racial justice with their children. In the decade since its founding, the Philly Children's March has become the Philly Children's Movement (PCM), renamed to better reflect the broad range of our work. Organized by core members, PCM holds community events, child-led actions, organizes family contingents within larger marches, works with teachers and children in schools, offers curricular materials, and provides gatherings to build community around disrupting racism and organizing with children for both joy and justice. We believe that families and schools are crucial groups in which the skills to resist and dismantle racism are formed, nurtured, and practiced. At our core, the Philly Children's Movement seeks to center the power of children in working towards a world without racism.

In this pursuit, PCM views families and educators as central actors in speaking out, calling for justice, and beginning to work for the systemic change needed for a more equitable and just society. We know that ensuring that parents and educators have a "way in" to the movement was equally as important as finding ways for children themselves to grow up with an understanding of race, racism, and racial justice. Children in PCM grew up hearing adults talk about these ideas, but more importantly, they grew up talking about and challenging the ideas and institutions themselves. At its founding, PCM was a Black- and mother-led collective, with that latter part shifting as we transition to the second generation of PCM leaders who have emerged from participation in PCM as children and youth. PCM has been organizing with families, children, and educators for well over a decade now in homes, at playgrounds and parks, in libraries and schools, and once COVID-19 hit, online as well. Yet the founding roots of our organizing emerged largely from family organizing in core member homes:

"You're in my house, at my dinner table, around my family, and my mom. And it's a norm, and that was countering what I was experiencing everywhere else. I feel comfortable talking about race when everyone else is so uncomfortable about talking about these topics because as PCM moms and kids, we did it all the time."

-Sam

"There was a mix of people but really seeing the Black people taking charge and leading and teaching us, I feel like that was something that I hadn't seen before because my teachers at school, when we were learning about that kind of stuff, that's not the people who were teaching me. In PCM, I was learning about the movement from people I knew. It gave me an understanding, and a way to have a connection with the Black Lives Matter movement because PCM was really a place to learn about it, have a connection to it, stay involved, and DO it.

-Reece

Positionality

The founders of PCM are seven Black and three white mothers. Jen is one of the white founders, and mom to Sam and her three younger (now adult) children, who all grew up in PCM. She is a professor and activist. Organizing in a Black-led collective was transformative for Jen as an educator, but she is most grateful for the role the PCM core and their families played in parenting and raising our families together for over a decade. Along with several other founding/core members, Jen is now transitioning to a more advisory role within PCM. Reece and Sam have also been with PCM since its inception; they held the banner together at the front of PCM's first march when Sam was a teen and Reece was a preschooler. Sam is Black and male and now a PCM core member and elementary school teacher himself. He leads workshops and community actions and plays an essential role in leading and sustaining the PCM collective. Reece is a current high schooler, biracial female, and daughter of Tia, a Black core member. Reece is active in several justice organizations across the city, has co-led PCM events, and is currently part of conversations on establishing a Youth Core for PCM.

As children of founding and core members of PCM, Reece and Sam also witnessed both the community and growing pains of PCM firsthand: from caring for children from a wide variety of ages to learning to be an effective core. They remember the chaos of 'meetings 'where the kids ran around in the basement while their Mamas cooked up activism around the kitchen table:

The age range was pretty big. There were way older kids and younger kids, but while there was that difference, it was like everyone was just playing. There'd be a show on the TV, kids were all running around, we were playing, and everyone was interacting with different people. Seeing the same kids over and over again, it felt almost like seeing your

cousins who you don't really see that often- it was a little awkward at first, but then it's just right back like you never stopped.

-Reece

I think obviously the fact that we were all young kids- babies to high schoolers, whether it be at someone's house or like a park or something- just to have that space to decompress and also have camaraderie, but also to just be in motherhood and childhood together. Like it's not just some book group, right? We get very close with them all over time. And I think that's what makes PCM different; you just don't have organizations that have a story like that. The kids see it, and you can feel it. It was almost like the Avengers or something; it was pretty freaking cool. There's just that feeling of pride. -Sam

The older children worked to keep the younger ones alive while their parents planned child-centered actions for the Black Lives Matter movement. Our meetings were fluid, constantly interrupted, loud, often joyful, sometimes contentious, and always unfinished. But they were also spaces where a group of 10 mothers and their 25 children formed a community of practice (Lave & Wenger) around racial justice activism that supported families and educators both within and far beyond those ten core families. Children were always centered in PCM actions, leading marches, making posters, and holding the microphone. But as Sam highlights below, children and youth in PCM were also able to move from the outer edges of listening to their parents planning events and into more active leadership roles within PCM:

Yes, I had to watch a lot of people's kids. That's not a bad thing, but…I'd also sit on the steps and listen because at first I wasn't allowed because I had to watch the kids. But then I was allowed in the meeting, and it was kind of cute because then kids who are younger than me also had the same experience of listening from the steps and hearing what was being said.

-Sam

I was at those protests all the time, but for a lot of kids, it's hard to find a program where you can be an activist. Yes, I'm an activist, I can speak about things that are important to me like body positivity and food justice, and if there's something I'm passionate about, then there's something I need to do about it. That 100% comes from PCM.

-Reece

Youth leadership and the intergenerational lineage of PCM have evolved as emergent strategies (brown, 2017). As PCM has worked to be in "right relationship" with children and youth, as well as the movements we work in solidarity with, it has become clear that the 'passing down 'of core responsibilities is something that founding children and former college student interns over the years have assumed as the next generation of PCM organizers. Immediately after adrienne maree brown visited his Black Lives Matter course in college, Sam shared Brown's work with the core, saying, "this *is so* PCM!" We have named and explored emergent strategies in core meetings and educator workshops and used it frequently in examining the ways we organize together. He reflected that:

The world was a freaking mess, I didn't know how to navigate myself, and emergent strategy was definitely where I started. Leaning into the fact that our organizing kind of comes down to being playful and being joyful.

-Sam

Play as a Tool of Resistance

One of the core emergent strategies in PCM has been the role of play in our movement. Play has served as everything from a welcome distraction, to a joyful respite, an organizing ethos, and an accidental lesson turned tactic. Beyond marching, one of our

earliest consistent actions was to host playdates. These open playdates were often constructed around parents sharing how to talk to their young children about race, racism, and the Black Lives Matter movement. There was often some type of material- an article, children's book, or movie, to serve as a springboard for parental discussions. Sometimes there were family discussions that included parents and children together, and other times, parents talked while children played nearby. Yet no matter what level of planning (or not), the children played together. And the adults quickly realized that, maybe even more so than offering some kind of lesson or content, children playing together across race and seeing parents thinking and talking together- that maybe that was the most important thing. If, as Montessori contended, "play is the work of the child," then there was no way to do the challenging work of antiracism, racial identity development, and racial justice without it. The centrality of play led to some interesting tactics and some genuinely joyful organizing.

Making and wearing capes instead of carrying posters was one such tactic that came from the genius of a six-year-old girl. Ayanna had spent nearly 30 minutes carefully creating a "family banner" for a Moms of Black Sons march. Her banner said "I matter," and it had her name and a very carefully drawn self-portrait. Yet Ayanna sort of melted when asked to carry the banner for the march. She suddenly looked up at us and asked if we could "make it a cape," and so, we did. Ayanna zoomed throughout the lengthy march as a superhero, and a child-led tactic was born.

Reece also remembers making protest capes:

I remember one time we were at the playground and we were making these capes with sayings on the back, kind of like superheroes, but also writing a message. I think that was super important, because it's a children's movement, so being able to do that through play, that's super cool. Being able to feel like a superhero makes a kid feel involved, and makes you want to do it. That was really cool.

In addition to capes, Reece recalls enlisting her Doc McStuffins and Spider-Man dolls in another child-led strategy developed by a PCM kid- the toy protest- where children pose their own toys, dolls, and superheroes holding child-made signs and joining the movement:

You realize, there's many people trying to share the same message as you, and so, you're not alone in this. And you have to pick the message, put it on your toy, and it was fun as a kid, but then, also, it was protesting. We were making a protest at home, so it was cool to visualize and send a powerful message to powerful people. I felt like we were speaking through the toys. Like, it was really our voices, with my feelings about it and what I wanted to say.

Toy protests would come to be central to organizing at home during COVID-19 in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. PCM teamed up with similar child-centered collectives around the country to organize a #FamilyDayofAction that then led to a #FamilySummer4BlackLives.

Hundreds of families across the US took part in these collective virtual actions. We offered many options, including candlelight vigils, chalking the walk, playlist curation, and 8-word poems, but we found that toy protests were one of the most effective strategies for engaging children and for encouraging others to join in.

The pandemic also challenged the core to find new ways to support families, children, and educators. We offered many online resources and workshops centered around the racial flashpoint that erupted in the wake of George Floyd's death. But we also wanted to remain true to our playful, joyful, child-centered roots. One of the strategies that

emerged during this time was the curation and creation of our 'Joy & Justice kits.' Since so many children were stuck at home in such a pivotal time in our history, core families (including children as young as two years old) worked to pack and distribute the kits to families across the city. Kits contained items for resisting and for playing, and some that could pull double-duty. Double-duty items like sidewalk chalk for "chalking the walk," garden signs for toy protests, and an earth squeeze-ball to "grasp the world in the palm of your hand" were paired with Black2School items (a ruler and post-its) to see how your school "measures up" in hiring and supporting Black teachers. These packets invited children and families to play at a time when play was suppressed- and to couple joy and justice right there in their homes.

Education as a Nexus of Resistance

I think realizing education as a tool of oppression was a huge thing. The mis-education of myself was the root of my college studies. It's also why I'm a teacher now, so that I can answer the questions kids have when they come up.

-Sam

Beyond the family and family-centered community organizing, PCM was also invited into schools to help students and/or teachers learn, organize, and protest, all while centering student voice. We worked in many elementary schools with children from kindergarten through middle school. Our work in schools has been both powerful and rare. Where we were able to collaborate with teachers, students in their classrooms were invited to explore the Black Lives Matter movement, develop the practice of activism, and build an emerging power analysis. As Sam's reflection above speaks to how necessary and unusual this work is in schools, yet it is even more unusual to experience it as student-initiated work in urban classrooms with children under twelve years old. In the partnerships highlighted here, K-6th grade students requested to learn more about activism, the Black Lives Matter movement, or both. Our first partnership stemmed from a kindergarten student wanting to lead her class in a Black Lives Matter march throughout the school. The second partnership was initiated by a group of fourth graders who viewed gun control as central to the Black Lives Matter movement and who wanted to learn more about possibilities for raising awareness about both. And the final partnership discusses ways in which PCM partnered to offer curriculum support to a first-grade teacher hoping to deepen her antiracist practice.

"Because…Black Lives Matter" in Kindergarten

Despite their young age, students' lived experience exposes them to examine power imbalances in their immediate reality, but their introduction to the larger movement helps connect them to ideas that are deeper, more structural, and more systemic. As Reece reflects, *"When planning a march, there are three things I think about: What do we want people to know? What's the message we want to send? What is the change we want to see?"* This framing is essentially how PCM works to support young children in speaking up and out. After working with a PCM facilitator who pushed the student to think about what Black Lives Matter means to her and to learn more of what the movement means, the Black kindergartner who led the action in her school picked up the mic in front of the entire K-8 student body. She began her (unrehearsed) speech with, "I am for peace and against violence," and as she continued, she added, "I am against police brutality in MY community... because Black Lives Matter." This young student was making powerful connections between her passion for peace, the foundation of the movement, and her own neighborhood.

Watching a five-year-old lead her entire school in a march was staggeringly powerful. Yet when the idea was proposed as an alternative to an MLK Day service activity, her white teacher felt unprepared to support the student and reached out to our organization

for guidance. This kindergarten teacher was not an activist, nor had she ever connected with the Black Lives Matter movement. But as a responsive educator committed to multicultural education, she reflected, "I knew that her wanting to do this, that was important, and I needed to find a way to make that happen, even if I didn't know how". Having the external support of our 'activist organization 'allowed the teacher to bring her student's vision to life. We saw it as our duty to support activism while modeling and planting seeds in the classroom community to embrace discussions about race and racism, developing a budding analysis of equity and power.

This process of developing skills for resistance echo what Gorski (2019) refers to as equity literacy: the ability to recognize, respond to and redress bias and inequity in a sustainable way. And while we as facilitators are not typically dropping names of critical theorists when working with kindergartners, we are bringing their theoretical work into the classroom community with us, making it visible and relevant to both the teacher and students. As Freire teaches us, "Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world." (1972, p.34).

"Guns Don't Matter!" in Fourth Grade

They're walking down the street and they're screaming "Hey, hey! Ho, ho! All the guns have got to go!" and "Black Lives Matter!" And that's the moment where I think, "it's worth it." The kids were like, "This shit that we just did was awesome." And absolutely no one is doing this with kids this young. Obviously it's very hard to find those pockets in schools.

-Sam

What happens in classroom spaces with young children can be either oppressive or transformative, but it is so often oppressive. So much of what children experience in schools is steeped in conformity, so bringing activism even briefly into those spaces can be a liberating touchpoint for both educators and students. Our work with the fourth graders in another urban school was initiated after their teacher invited us in to talk about activism with the class. As part of their community service project on gun violence, his students wanted to explore ways to raise awareness of the problem. After they researched relevant state and local legislation, we came in to share some artifacts of our work with the children. We shared photos and videos of marches from our marches and helped them to practice chants to see what it felt like to use their voices in that way. The students had decided that gun violence was a Black Lives Matter issue, and after our visit, that activism was the best way to highlight it. They wanted to work with us to plan a Black Lives Matter/anti-gun march through their neighborhood. We visited 3 more times after that to help to write chants together, create posters and a banner.

That march, held several weeks into our working with them, was the most powerful march we had ever been a part of. It is impossible to do it justice, attempting to describe why. But there was something about being led through the streets of a neighborhood bustling with promise and grappling with gun violence, hearing nine and ten year olds lead original chants that they'd written, hold signs that they carefully planned and made… watching them walk past neighbors who came out on their porches and stoops to see about the noise, hearing their voices as they passed other students peering through the chain-link fence at a neighboring school, giving passionate speeches about people they knew and loved who were lost to gun violence, demanding concrete changes in policing. As one of the students wrote after their march, "*If you walk around holding signs and saying things, it won't make a difference. You have to put your heart into it. That's why our march was a success. That's why we made a difference. Everyone cared.*

Everyone really wanted to do it. You can do anything if you put your heart to it. It doesn't matter how old or young you are." Student-penned chants included: *"I matter. You matter. We matter. Guns don't matter!"* This riff on Black Lives Matter demonstrates the way these young students were working to connect the movement for Black lives to gun violence in their community. Their action was child-initiated and child-led, full of agency. They *really* wanted to march, and march they did! As a high schooler, Sam was part of the team of PCM core members who worked with the fourth graders. He recalls that:

The last part was when we were coming back to the school; one of the kids wanted to share what he wrote and he started off very quiet, and I think everyone just supported him in that moment. It was like another huge thing that I've never done before. First of all, these kids- I don't know who these kids are. Second of all, adults, I don't know most of these adults here either. So we're basically strangers, but what we're doing right now…you could feel the collective energy. And you could feel you're a part of organizing in the larger Black Lives Matter movement, but here they are, really young kids, and you don't see that much at all.

From there, it was on to City Hall to caucus with members of City Council about their plans to stem gun violence in the city. Gun violence was far from a remote issue for these students- when we discussed who had lost family members to gun violence, almost every hand went up. And on the weekend before the City Hall action, two students had lost family members to gun violence; one of whom was in attendance, and one was absent due to the death in the family. This horrific and sobering reality was on all of our minds as the students sat around the large chamber roundtable. These same students would go on to lobby in the state capitol for both the Senate and House versions of the gun control bills they were supporting. Their teachers were seasoned activists themselves who felt comfortable leading this work and frequently probed the students to dig deeper and to think beyond the symptoms and identify the systems that were impacting their community.

Yet armed as they were with information about bills, the legislative process, and their connections to politicians, we noticed that the further away they traveled from their own community, the further away the fourth graders seemed from investment in the process. Unlike the community march, these interactions with politicians in such high-profile spaces required a level of performativity and logistical support that made them far more dependent upon adults. It also highlighted the challenges of guiding younger children to explore systemic issues, with the connection to their lives feeling more remote and the change being slow. While the opportunity to lobby and learn about the legislative process provided education about the political machine that governed the availability of legal guns, we noticed a shift in student energy at both the state house and City Hall. In the political arena, students behaved more in keeping with adult-dictated roles and expectations. While interested in the topic of gun control (the class overwhelmingly voted to study it), we wondered if they felt less connected to the larger *movement* of gun control vs. Black Lives Matter.

These more politically-focused actions were activities that required a class trip away from school, with every student attending. This led PCM to explore the ethics of activism as a mandatory school assignment. Antiracism was absolutely not optional, but what is the line between agency and agenda? How do adult decisions to explore activism in the classroom honor the personal goals and beliefs of students? How can that be negotiated in a compulsory school setting? It would be unlikely for these kinds of activities to be mandated at the high school level, but due to requirements for supervision in elementary school, young students were offered no choice. Kumashiro (2000) warns against replacing "one (socially hegemonic) framework for seeing the world with another (academically hegemonic) one. (p. 43). Forcing students to adopt a certain critical stance

can still be oppressive, particularly with our youngest students. Students should be their own agents in questioning and challenging present knowledge systems. After reflecting on our work with this school, the core made it a policy to encourage teachers to craft a penalty-free 'opt out' plan for students who may, for whatever reason, not want to join actions. Finding the line between young children's agency and working to invite them into activism is an ever-present struggle in our work. In fact, one of PCM's former interns and newest core members, Carrie Ryter (2025), has researched this issue extensively in her undergraduate thesis, *"Then we would know, and then we could help the world:" Exploring the Multidirectional Relationship Between Young Children, Families, and Social Movements.*

"Black People are Loved" Intergenerational Organizing in 1st Grade

Not all of PCM's work in the classroom has been about marching, and most of our invitations into classrooms come from adults. One of the alums of our antiracism workshop series for educators signed up for a follow-up year of coaching around Radical Morning Meeting, a core PCM practice that taps into PCM's pillars of dialogue, storytelling, history, identity, power, joy, and justice. As a white first-grade teacher in a public school in Northeast Philadelphia, Brooke was fiercely committed to antiracist teaching. We paired her with Miss Susie, a veteran teacher, mom to one of PCM's founders, and grandmother to Reece. As Brooke's six- and seven-year-old students learned about activism within the civil rights movement, their PCM coach, Miss Susie, shared what it was like for her growing up Black in the South during that same time period, making connections between then and now. Miss Susie also read them stories from Nicolas Smith, turned them on to Nina Simone tunes, and asked them questions like "what lyric does the world need to hear?" One student responded with: "*Violnce wouldnit make the world better peace would! hate is like a raje of fire in your hart so the wings of freedam need to swing doown and fliye awaye!"* This young student is working to make sense of racial injustice and dreams of liberation. Students adored Miss Susie and the experience of learning about history directly from a community elder. There were also emails from parents of Black students, thanking Brooke and Susie for *"teaching my child about our history."* And Brooke's practice, while already antiracist, was deepened, nurtured, and made more joyful with Miss Susie's care, knowledge, and support. Miss Susie put it best when she reflected: *"We created this community of love. That Black people are loved. That Black families love their children, and Black communities love their kids."* This directly taps into two of the thirteen core principles of the Black Lives Matter Movement: Intergenerational and Black Families (Matthews & Jones, 2023). As Miss Susie taught us, this historical, loving, and joyful side of the Black Lives Matter movement is every bit as essential as naming and addressing systemic injustice.

One Decade In: Lessons from Children

So what has ten years of organizing for and with children taught us? Organizing with children has offered us some cautionary tales. Organizing *for* children can easily lead to adultism and agendas that are not the children's. This is a constant struggle in our work- adultism is so omnipresent in working with young children that it's challenging to even identify. Centering children in a way that is authentic to children- to their ideas and what they care about- is an ongoing, ever-present tension that runs throughout our work. We have grown our ability to see what is authentic, but we are constantly learning how we derail it. We know that we are closest to being in "right relationship" when we are organizing with, rather than for, children.

The last decade taught us that breaking rules is essential to organizing with children. We began organizing because families with young children were largely excluded from protests and actions. "Children don't belong here" was the first and most important rule we broke. Not only did we create child-centered events, but we also worked with

organizers of larger events to create family contingents and consider ways in which children and families could be included. The second rule we broke was that "activism does not belong in elementary school." Despite historical examples, including the incredible bravery of Ruby Bridges, the reality at the start of 2015 was that it was incredibly rare to see the worlds of activism and elementary school collide, especially in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. These rules, we learned, were meant to be broken if we are to disrupt, rather than uphold, racist systems.

Children taught us about the power of community, both within the core and across the city; our children helped us to slow down and connect first as mothers and humans and friends, in a way that is critical in healthy organizing spaces. They also forced us to boil down the essentials of complex ideas and build a genuine community of care that anchors every aspect of our work. Although adults often worked to distill information about the events swirling around them, children brought their deep sense of both unfairness and justice to add to the analysis.

Their demand for simplicity, play, joy, and connection in times of deep despair was healing for all of the adults involved.

Most of all, children taught us that play, joy, and justice are deeply intertwined. Young children will play no matter how serious the issue or how heavy the action is, and that is a very good thing. We learned that while planning was important, many of the purest moments of childhood agency happen during unplanned times: when the toddler old picks up the Black Lives Matter sign and walks all around the field chanting with it held high above her head, or when the preschooler steals the megaphone after the event has ended and leads 12 other children in their own march, shouting "The people united will never be divided!" or when children invent protests capes and toy protests because they instinctively know how to blend joy with justice in ways that would likely never occur to adults. Sam sums it up this way: *"after 10 years of child-led organizing, countless mighty uprisings, little shoes marching, big voices yelling, tiny hands writing poems, and communal banners, it is the children who remind us that there is no justice without joy."*

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