

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Scars of Suspension:

Narratives as Testimonies of School-Induced Collective Trauma

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Tunette Michele Powell

2020

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Scars of Suspension:  
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by

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Doctor of Education

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Professor Kimberly Gomez, Chair

The school-to-prison pipeline is typically framed by researchers and scholars within academia as a “youth problem.” While it is true that youth are the bodies that are being targeted, are the direct participants and experience the immediate punitive impact with respect to the loss of school day(s), the impact of school discipline has a much broader impact. In this dissertation, I argue that like the spread of radiation after a nuclear bomb, the impact of school suspension permeates not only the child but the parents, siblings, grandparents and others in the kinship circle. Historically, in Black communities, the family structure is such that the child cannot be bracketed out from the framework of kinship. A consequence of this is that the burden of disproportionate school disciplinary measures that affect Black students also deeply impact their families, especially families of young children. I argue that the disproportionate use of school disciplinary measures

such as school suspension creates a collective trauma for Black families. Considering this, this dissertation analyzes the experience of trauma and documents the narratives of Black families who have experienced trauma. Using qualitative methods that include the analysis of narratives from a cross-country sample of 14 Black parents presented through a combination of short stories and hip-hop verses, I theorize that the scarring of a young child's school suspension on the immediate family be considered trauma.

Keywords: *school-to-prison pipeline, early childhood education, trauma, Black families*

The dissertation of Tunette Michele Powell is approved.

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2020

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## VITA

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2019-2020      **Dissertation Year Fellowship (\$20,000)** – Funded by University of California, Los Angeles Graduate Division. This grant funds the final year of my dissertation research – The Scars of Suspension: Narratives as Testimonies of School-Induced Collective Trauma.

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- 2018            **Graduate Summer Research Mentorship (\$6,000)** - Under the mentorship of Dr. Kimberly Gomez, I explored the ways in which school suspension shaped the perceptions that Black parents had of themselves and their children.
- 2017            **Graduate Summer Research Mentorship (\$6,000)** - Under the mentorship of Dr. Tyrone Howard, I conducted an exploratory study to learn more about the ways in which Black families talked about and experienced punitive forms of discipline in early childhood education.

## PUBLICATIONS

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### **Manuscripts**

- 2020            **Powell, T.** Coles, J.A. (2020). “We Still Here”: Black Mothers’ Personal Narratives of Sense Making and Resisting Antiblackness and the Suspensions of their Black Children. *Race Ethnicity and Education*.
- 2019            Coles, J.A. **Powell, T.** (2019). A BlackCrit Analysis on Urban Black Youth and Suspension Disproportionality as Anti-Black Symbolic Violence. *Race Ethnicity and Education*.

### **Book Chapters**

- 2019            **Powell, T.** Keeney Parks, S. (In Press). “They Never Listen to the Parent”: Parent Narratives at the Intersection of Trauma, Racism and Disability in Schools. Book chapter in *Racism by Another Name: Black Students, Overrepresentation, and the Carceral State of Special Education*.
- 2017            **Powell, T.** Syrek, R. (2017). Teaching Children to Fail: How Early Education is Failing Black Youth. In I.U. Iruka, S.M. Curenton, T.R. Durden (Eds.), African American Children in Early Childhood Education: Making the Case for Policy Investments in Families, Schools, and Communities (*Advances in Race and Ethnicity in Education, Volume 5*). (pp. 267-290). Emerald Publishing Limited.

## Track 1: Introduction

*Old folks say that trouble don't last always but I can't shake it,  
"What they do now," every time the phone rings, I can't fake it,  
Can still see the hurt in my grandmama's eyes,  
"You just like yo' Daddy," You ain't gone make it,  
We all walking around with the 'trouble',  
It's a cycle,  
Feels like we ain't gone break it,  
And my Mama crying out, "Lord, I just can't take it,"  
School said I was bad, so that became my new name,  
After so many suspensions, you're never the same,  
Watch the adults around me play the blame game,  
Laugh it off like you don't care to keep from going insane,  
No matter how far removed, I can still feel the pain,  
Twenty years passed but I can still see the stain,  
School did more damage to us than crack cocaine,  
Trauma so deep that it runs through my veins,  
But this ain't strange,  
This is to Black as normal as Seattle sees rain, But  
y'all don't see us, so the trauma remains...*

## **A Problem Born**

When I was 3 years old, I was expelled from preschool because, as my mother remembers it, I was “acting too grown.” That school year, my mother never enrolled me anywhere else. Instead, my Aunt Linda and my grandma watched me while my mother worked.

I was a preschool drop-out.

My elementary school experience was similar. Whether it was me “acting too grown,” fighting over something silly or passing letters because I was bored, the end result was the same: I was suspended and because my mother worked, my Aunt Linda and my grandma watched me. It was the early 1990s and on the East Side of San Antonio, Texas, where I grew up, the Black community was unraveling. Crack cocaine had kidnapped Black mothers and fathers, including my own father. When my grandma saw me in the principal’s office, it was reminiscent of the countless times she had seen my father strung out on crack cocaine as he was being hauled off to the county jail. To my grandma, my schooling experience had become my father’s prison experience.

It broke her heart.

I was the source of my grandma’s heartbreak; of my mother’s tears; and of my younger brother Bo’s pathway to school suspension. I carried those burdens with me. Rather than focusing on becoming better in school, I focused on getting out. The older I got, the less I attended school. I was chronically absent and despite a B average in high school, my mother was forced to pay a fine to the courts for my absenteeism. I was assigned to a probation officer and sentenced to Saturday school and after-school detention for most of my 11th grade year of high school to make up for all of the days I had missed. Despite skipping school and being suspended at nearly every grade level of pre-K-12, I graduated from high school and tried college for a bit before dropping out. I eventually went back to college after a four-year hiatus, and in 2012, eight



years after graduating from high school, I became the first woman – and just the second person – in my family to earn a bachelor’s degree. On the surface, it appeared as though the adult-me had outrun the suspended child-me. On the surface, the trauma of being cast out by school and the trauma experience in my family had been conquered. And then in 2014, the phone rang.

“We need you to come pick up Jason,” the director of my oldest son’s preschool said.

“Is he being suspended?” I asked.

“We don’t like to use the word ‘suspended,’” the director remarked. “We just call it going home for the day.”

That same year, my oldest two sons, Jason Jr. (known as JJ) and Joah, who were 3 and 4 years old at the time, went “home for the day” nearly a dozen times combined. By 2014, my life was completely different than that of the 1990s. Having escaped poverty and married now, my husband – who was in the Air Force – and I were living in a suburb of Omaha, Nebraska. I was a published author, motivational speaker and founder of a nonprofit. But no matter the years and miles removed, that phone call took me back to my childhood – that of not only being told that I was a problem but actually believing it. While on the first of multiple calls that year with my children’s preschool, I was reminded that I could not outrun trauma, out-accomplish trauma, nor could I buy my way out of trauma. The trauma of both my own childhood experiences with suspension and those of my children permeated my core being. Similar to a soldier, safe and away from the battlefields having a reflexive duck for cover response after hearing a loud sound, suspension had impaired my hearing. Every time the phone rang, the sound brought tears to my eyes as I was always expecting it to be a suspension phone call. The trauma impaired my sight. As I looked in the mirror, I no longer saw the accomplished woman, only a problem who had given birth to two problems.

*Flash forward, now that girl is grown,  
A mother of her own,  
Successful and her kids in a two-parent home,  
Far from the hood,  
Reading to them, doing everything they say I should,  
Old folks at church, “Girl, you doing good,”  
But then she gets that call,  
Pick up your sons; I guess good means bad, after all,  
Apples too close to the tree, But what  
about what they promised me?  
Two-parent home; I got money now; see?  
Black to life; Black to reality*

## **A Problem Birthed**

Out of the bellies and on the backs of Black folks, the United States, as we know it, was birthed. Black folks were raped of body, mind, and soul and forced into giving birth to a nation that to this day has refused to honor its mother and father. And while Black folks gave life to the United States in the form of what many have come to know as the “American Dream,” Black folks were force fed a nightmare of captivity and physical and emotional suffering. This nightmare – dating back to the advent of slavery in the United States – has been reproduced, for Black people, in every single institution and system in the United States, including schools. Because of this history in the United States, an educator’s first impression of a Black child is rooted in a bitter history that dates to a time when it was a crime for Black people, including Black children, to receive an education. Research suggests that in these educational spaces “of becoming” (Wortham, 2004), educators perceive Black students as students more likely needing

to be controlled, and Black children have become the most suspended students in the country (Gregory et. al, 2010; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2002; Noguera, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2016; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Black boys are the most suspended of any group of students; and Black girls - the most suspended of all girls - have the highest growing suspension rate of all students (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018; Crenshaw, Ocen & Nanda, 2015).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), Black K-12 students are nearly four times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as White students. Among children in preschool, Black children, who only make up 19% of preschool enrollment, represent 47% of preschool out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Furthermore, even among students with disabilities, who carry federal documents that are supposed to protect students' civil rights (e.g. IEP and 504 plans), Black students are unprotected as they are suspended more often than any other group of students with disabilities (Losen, 2018). Based on these statistics, it is easy to assume Black children – as young as 3 and 4 years old – are the problem – that their behavior and emotional responses are particularly maladaptive to schooling. However, Black and White children do not behave very differently; it is the adult response that is different (Bentley-Edwards, 2015; Gilliam, et. al, 2016; Morris, 2016). Previous studies have shown that adults typically view Black children as older, less innocent and more blameworthy compared to non-Black children, including Latino children (Dennis-Benn, 2016; Gilliam, et. al, 2016; Goff et al., 2014; Morris, 2016).

In my case, I was a curious child who asked a lot of questions and enjoyed talking. At home, my family, especially my father, called me smart and gifted. However, at school, preschool teachers interpreted that behavior as me “acting too grown.” Scholars such as Morris (2016) and Goff, et. al (2014) argue that school discipline disparities are rooted in a history of

the dehumanization and adultification of Black children. Morris (2016) has asserted that Black girls are treated like they should know better (emphasis added here), adultified and are consequently robbed of the chance to be children. Goff, et. al (2014), who conducted a study that measured innocence, found that Black children were rated as significantly less innocent than White children and children generally. More recently, Gilliam, et. al (2016) found that the early childhood educators in their study (N=132) tended to observe Black students more closely, especially Black boys. According to the authors, early childhood educators expected [my emphasis here] Black preschoolers to exhibit more challenging behaviors compared to their nonBlack peers. Bentley-Edwards (2015), referring here to Black adolescents, echoed these findings with the following:

...oftentimes you see a harsher disciplinary tactic used to try to control and set an example. It's less considerate of the actual developmental stages. So oftentimes, especially for African-American boys, they'll be engaged with by teachers as if they're speaking to another adult and not as if they're speaking to a child. In adolescence, it's completely normal to be a little bit rebellious.

This empirical literature suggests that given the racial and racializing context and history of the United States coupled with what we know about implicit bias, even with the best intentions, race-neutral policies, policies that do not explicitly address race, are never actually neutral (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo & Pollock, 2016). Additionally, this empirical literature provides insight into the ways in which schools operate as racial projects – meaning that these institutions “assign meaning to race” and are “either challenging or reproducing race and racial inequality” (Omi & Winant, 1994). Thus, school suspension practices actually serve as one of the many ways in which historic notions of race and racial inequality are reproduced in schools.

## **Beyond the Pipeline**

One of the most common ways scholars have framed these racial inequalities and the impact that result from school suspension disparities is through the school-to-prison pipeline – (Wald & Losen, 2003) – a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into juvenile and criminal justice systems (ACLU, 2014). As Wald & Losen (2003) further explained:

Adult prisons and juvenile halls are riddled with children who have traveled through the school-to-prison pipeline...The single largest predictor of later arrest among adolescent females is having been suspended, expelled, or held back during the middle school years (p. 11).

For the nation's youngest Black children, this is especially damaging as young children who are suspended or expelled are 10 times more likely to face incarceration than young children who are not (U.S. Department of Education and Health & Human Services, 2014).

The framing of the school-to-prison pipeline vividly captures the structural and ideological components of school suspension and speaks to the danger of this practice. Additionally, because of the extensive research on the impact of incarceration, we know that for Black people, mass incarceration rates mirror school suspension rates and suggest that Black children and adults are being stripped away from their communities, which specifically contributes to the destruction of Black families (Alexander, 2010). Even for children, like me, who escape the pipeline, destruction – even in its invisibility – is present in the form of emotional and psychological scarring.

To date, little research has captured the ways in which “policy is lived” (Dumas, 2014) and experienced by those who escape the pipeline. Furthermore, there is even less of a field of research that has explored the reverberation of trauma throughout a child's family. Therefore, my

research was exploratory and asked: How do Black parents describe their experiences of having a young child <sup>1</sup>suspended from school?

Guided by parent testimonies, in this dissertation, I aim to offer evidence for three broad claims – the school-to-prison pipeline is a family issue; school suspension is a disaster; the enduring effects of school suspension is a form of collective trauma. First, the school suspensions of children are not and cannot be decontextualized from their families. For example, in my case, I was not the only person affected. Typically framed as a youth issue, the literature on the school-to-prison pipeline focuses on what is happening to children to the exclusion of families, especially parents, which unintentionally reifies the racially unequal historical practices, including how Black parents and their children were not respected as a family unit (e.g. Black parents, and their children, seen as little more than animals, property for whom decisions must be made) (Quallen, 2016).

To advance this work and our understanding of the physical, emotional and psychological scarring as a result of disparate school suspension practices, as researchers, we must contextualize Black children as individuals who are also part of a family and a community. In this particular context, we need to explore how racial inequalities in schools make their way into a child’s family life, which is significant for at least three reasons. First, this approach to research offers a deeper analysis of how experiences in schools extend beyond an individual child. Second, this approach to scholarship counters mainstream narratives of Black people as a “problem people” who come from broken homes and absentee parents (Reynolds, 2010; Hall, 1981).

<sup>1</sup> 1 Throughout this chapter, the usage of young child refers to children in early childhood education - children through 9 years old.



Figure 1. *The Reverberation of Trauma*

Finally, in African philosophy children are rarely, if at all, decontextualized from their families and are instead rooted in the idea, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1989). Hence, collective trauma, as is illustrated in Figure 1, suggests that if a child is scarred then it should be expected that the family and the community of that child is also at risk of being scarred. By the mere exploration of collective trauma, using this framework with and for Black people speaks to its potential to be culturally relevant as both a theoretical and analytical framework. I couple ancient African philosophy of the collective with Kai Erikson’s (1976) definition of collective trauma – “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages bonds attaching people together and impairs prevailing sense of communality” (p. 154) to uncover the testimonies of Black parents as narratives of collective trauma.

My second claim asserts that school suspension be understood as a disaster that wreaks disastrous outcomes. My final claim, which is related to the second claim, asserts that the emotional scarring of school suspension in Black families should be understood as a result of trauma - not only for the individual child suspended but for Black families and communities collectively.

This concept of scarring dates back to Kai Erikson’s (1976) book, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*, wherein Erikson went “looking for scars”

in a tightly knit Appalachian community as a result of a devastating flood in 1972 in Buffalo Creek, West Virginia. Rather than using a term like “aftermath” to describe what happens as a result of a disaster, Erikson used the term “scars” to encompass the “damage done to the minds and the spirits of the people who survived the disaster” (p. 135). Additionally, in this book, the author pushed against definitions of disaster and trauma and asserted the following:

...we would classify an event as disaster if it had the property of bringing traumatic reactions... we would presumably want to keep quotation marks around the term “disaster,” because the intent... is not to offer a new dictionary meaning for an old word but to suggest that there are any number of happenings in human life that seem to produce the same effects as a conventional disaster without exhibiting the same physical properties (p. 254).

Following Erikson’s lead, by using the word “disaster” to study school suspension and the scarring of school suspension as trauma, I intentionally racialize language, in this dissertation. As Alim (2016) asserts, we must “view race through the lens of language and vice versa” (p. 1). Here, I argue that the language of suspension for those who are suspended and experience suspension as children, parents, and extended family members is both racial and racializing. With a framing such as the school-to-prison pipeline, in policy, research, and practice, the word “prison,” language conveying punishment for a crime, typically thought to be a place for “bad” people, unintentionally implies that a person, even a child, may have done something to deserve that outcome. However, I argue that the trauma experienced by the child, and family kin, is frequently un-deserved given the uneven responses to the behavior of Black children versus nonBlack children. Here, the choice to use the language of “disaster” and trauma aims to shift the conversation from what have Black children and families done to deserve this experience of suspension, and its aftermath, to a conversation centered on what is happening to Black children and families. In what I consider to be a first word, rather than a final word, this dissertation interrogates school suspension in early childhood education through the narratives of Black



parents – a group that while directly impacted by this “disaster,” have been left, by and large, unexamined.

## **Dissertation Overview**

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to examine and build an understanding of school suspension as a “disaster” and to consider the aftermath (read scarring) of this “disaster” as trauma at both the individual and collective level. In Chapter 1, I have introduced the experiences, drawing on my childhood and my experiences as a parent, that have influenced and shaped my scholarship, as well as offered a brief overview of the phenomena of school suspension disparities. Additionally, the chapter foreshadows the importance of rendering the trauma of school suspension visible through the narratives of Black parents. Chapter 2 will provide a more detailed review of the literature, including delving deeper into school suspension literature; an overview of literature that makes the case for studying this particular phenomenon through Black parents’ stories; and I provide an outline of collective trauma - the theoretical and analytical framework that guided this study. In Chapter 3, I will detail the methodology employed to interrogate these narratives, including altar call – a sampling method where the researcher uses their own lived experience as an entry point into research recruitment. Chapter 3 also offers information about context, participants, data collection, collective trauma as an analytical framework, methodological limitations, ethical considerations and the usage of hip hop as a data presentation method. In Chapter 4, I share the findings of this study, which are presented through short stories and rap songs. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss contributions and implications from this study for policy, practice and research.

The findings of this dissertation are written more akin to a prose form of written communication. The prose, here, is in poetry form, in the style of hip-hop lyrics. It reflects a collaboration of both the heart and the mind. As Nancy Bereano wrote in 1983 for the introduction of *Sister Outsider*, a collection of essays and speeches by Audre Lorde:

We have been told that poetry expresses what we feel, and theory states what we know; that the poet creates out of the heat of the moment, while the theorist's mode is, of necessity, cool and reasoned; that one is art and therefore experienced "subjectively" and the other is scholarship, held accountable in the "objective" world of ideas. We have been told that poetry has a soul and theory has a mind and that we have to choose (pp. 8-9).

In this dissertation, I do not choose between the poet and the theorist. In what I consider to be a FUBU<sup>2</sup> (for us, by us) dissertation, I am both a poet and a theorist concerned with both the emotional and intellectual. To that end, this dissertation reflects the prior art in the form of the theoretical framing of the work, and my systematic analytic approach to examining the data while also reflecting the emotional, which is present in the form of altar call methodology and the decision to present the testimonies of parents in a prose form. I suggest that the emotional and intellectual as companions in this dissertation reflect the ways the minds and hearts of parents, whose children have experienced suspension, engage with and live through these experiences. It also reflects what I hope will be a marriage of mind and heart as we, as a society, seek to re-examine our current implicit and explicit suspension policies.

<sup>2</sup> FUBU, which means for us, by us, is a hip-hop apparel company that was started by Daymond John, a Black businessman and investor.

## Track 2: Literature Review

This chapter unfolds in three parts: first, I delve deeper into the ways scholars have chosen to study school suspension disparities; before introducing collective trauma – the theoretical framework guiding this dissertation, including a discussion on the gap that this particular framework fills; finally, in this chapter, I make the case for my decision to illuminate the collective trauma that facilitates such disproportionality through the narratives of Black parents. Before reviewing the scholarship on the disproportionality of school suspension, I contend that disparities in school suspension rates between Black children and their non-Black peers should be considered as one of the “hidden injuries of desegregation” (Brown, 2016) as the practice of school suspension became a more formal and standard practice after *Brown vs Board of Education* – a landmark decision that resulted in school desegregation (Bickel, 1981; Fairclough, 2007). Before desegregation, discipline in segregated schools had rarely been a problem and according to Fairclough (2007):

The high incidence of suspensions shocked black parents. Segregated black schools had seldom employed suspension and expulsion as punishments. Now, not only were black students being disciplined in this way in large numbers, but in absolute numbers they were receiving most of the punishments. Students and parents alleged that systematic bias – white offenders being treated more leniently than blacks – tainted the administration of school discipline (p. 397).

More than 50 years later, schools are still tainted by systematic bias. Rather than being shocked by school suspension disproportionality, I argue, we should be shocked at the ongoing tendency, in our society, to ignore the voices of Black students and parents particularly with respect to issues of school suspension. I argue here that the presence of antiblackness structures school suspensions in ways that are inextricably linked to punishing Blackness and not the specific behavior of a Black student. Thus, school suspension has and continues to serve as one of the

ways in which schools operate as “racial projects” and assign meaning to race while also reproducing racial inequality (Omi & Winant, 1994) and anti-Blackness.

### **Disparities Revealed**

Scholars have spent decades exposing the ways in which these anti-Black exclusionary policies have reproduced racial inequality in schools. Most commonly, scholars have studied school suspension using quantitative data reported at local, state and national levels. Dating back to the 1970s and 80s, Bickel (1981) found that in Jefferson County, Kentucky, for example, Black students were more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts. According to Bickel, 45 % of Black students were suspended over the 1979-1980 school year compared to just 14 % of White students, mostly for “disobedience.” (p. 61.)

More recently, Losen & Skiba (2010) studied school suspension frequency by disaggregating subgroups of children by race/ethnicity and gender and found that both Black girls and Black boys made up the most suspended of all students in their respective gender groups. Additionally, Losen and Whitaker (2017) studied school suspension disparities and its impact on loss of classroom instruction and found that in California, for example, over the 2014-15 school year, Black students lost 43 days of instruction per 100 days enrolled compared to 11 days lost per 100 days for White students.

In an attempt to make sense of this data, Monroe (2005) found the following conditions as related to school suspension disparities, particularly as it related to Black boys: the criminalization of Black boys, zero tolerance policies, and race and class. And while Monroe focused explicitly on Black boys, as Crenshaw, Ocen and Nanda (2015) make plain, Black girls have the highest growing suspension rates of all students for reasons that the authors believe are tied to the criminalization and adultification of Black girls.

Adding to this research, Gilliam et. al (2016) investigated the role that educator implicit bias plays in issues of school discipline disparities. In their study, the authors found that educators – even after controlling for an educator’s race/ethnicity – observed Black children, especially Black boys, more closely than any other group of students and also found that educators expected Black children, both boys and girls, to exhibit more disruptive behavior compared to other students. Each of these studies, and the studies like them, reveal the overwhelming racial disproportionality present in school suspension. Like miner’s canaries, these studies have provided an early warning of danger of the racial disproportionality in suspension rates – something we have known about for decades. However, these studies do not explicate the trauma that facilitates such disproportionality. This work of exposing the harm and trauma of such disproportionality is still taking shape and has most often been captured through the counternarratives of formerly suspended high school students and adults. The next section highlights some of this work, as well as counternarratives being told outside of traditional academic scholarship.

### **The Souls Behind the Statistics**

The work of explicating this trauma is still in its infancy. In Morris’ (2015) *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, a collection of narratives of Black girls who had been suspended and expelled from school and pushed into juvenile halls, the author chronicled stories of Black girls being suspended for things such as the way they spoke, the way they wore their hair and the way their bodies were shaped. These narratives spoke life into the statistics as this collection of stories exposed the ways in which schools have historically been violent and traumatic spaces for Black girls.

Similarly, outside of traditional academic scholarship, these narratives of harm and trauma have been shared through more popular media including rap lyrics (Ross, 2014), film

(Smith, 2018), and blogs and editorials (Parker, 2018; Powell, 2014). Take for example an excerpt from Parker's (2018) blog where she reflects on having had a young child suspended from school:

The shame that you feel will bring you to your knees. You will never cry as much as you have to this point in his young life, and you will not know what to do. You will recall the multiple times the school called you to pick him up because he could not finish the school day, the way your stomach dropped when you saw the number flashed on your phone, the way you ran to your car, breathed your way through the tears so when you picked him up you could not be so angry you couldn't think rationally... you will also begin to hear the stories of others whose sons [sic] have also been kicked out of preschool. They whisper it to you, send you DMs, share anecdotes of parents they know... You also understand how traumatic this experience is for children and their families... In that moment of realization, you'll also admit that, in your belief of schools being places for all children... you have failed to protect his freedom.

In this excerpt, Parker brings the story of school suspension to life in a way that cannot be captured merely through quantitative data. Additionally, as is illustrated above, what is especially significant about the work being done outside of traditional academic scholarship is that it includes various perspectives - including variation across age and gender, as well the voices of Black parents and the Black community. Through these informal media, we have learned more about the disaster of school suspension and the traumatic aftermath. Additionally, through blogs and editorials, such as Parker's, conversations have ignited that include our youngest Black children – children as young as 3 and 4 years old. In the United States, with such an emphasis on early childhood education, particularly as it relates to the impact early childhood education has on a child's development later in life, the fact that the nation's youngest Black children are also being pushed out of schools is a disaster that we must not turn away from because this practice is essentially robbing Black children of the earliest, most impressionable stages of their life.

## **Early Childhood Education and School Suspension**

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights released a report revealing Black children were the most suspended of all children in early childhood education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Before 2014, most quantitative data captured the frequency of school suspension at the middle and high school levels. As such, qualitative data has also primarily focused on issues of school suspension at the middle and high school levels. However, given the scholarship on the importance of a child’s early years, it is imperative that we look at the impact of school suspension in early childhood education. Early childhood education – particularly preschool up until a child is about 9 years old – is defined by transitions in daily context and in authority. For example, as the U.S. Department of Education and Health & Human Services (2014) suggests:

The beginning years of any child’s life are critical for building the early foundation of learning, health and wellness needed for success in school and later in life. During these years, children’s brains are developing rapidly, influenced by the experiences, both positive and negative, that they share with their families, caregivers, teachers, peers, and in their communities.

Over the course of a child’s early years, access to high quality schooling, on average, has an impact on a child’s higher cognitive and social skills – even after controlling for her experiences at home (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal & Thornburg, 2009). High quality early childhood education has been linked to benefits such as less grade repetition and special education placement, higher rates of high school graduation and improved social behavior (Camilli et al., 2010). Early childhood education also represents a transfer of authority over the young child’s daily experiences, moving from sole parent/guardian authority to parents and teachers sharing authority. This shift in authority can be positive as parents receive support for the development of early learning and social skills in their children. It can also be negative, particularly when the young child’s experience of school disciplinary practices is heavily



punitive – as is the case with suspension. Suspension not only removes a child from the classroom, it also reduces the likelihood of a child receiving these benefits. The U.S. Department of Education and Health & Human Services (2014) stated the following:

Suspension and expulsion can influence a number of adverse outcomes across development, health, and education. Young students who are expelled or suspended are as much as 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration than those who are not. While much of this research has focused on expulsion and suspension in elementary, middle, and high school settings, there is evidence that expulsion or suspension early in a child’s education is associated with expulsion or suspension in later school grades.

Outcomes such as the increased likelihood of dropping out of high school, academic failure, grade retention and future incarceration (read scars) are all things that have the potential to be harmful and traumatic to both Black children and their families. However, without qualitative data – for example, stories that actually capture these families’ realities – we are unable to understand whether, and if so, the extent of harm and trauma that is experienced by young children and their families when young Black children are suspended from school.

Furthermore, without collective narratives, I argue that our understanding of harm and trauma imposed on Black children, and on their parents, are limited because we have statistically dislocated Black children from their families. The siloed data regarding the experiences of young Black children, with respect to school suspension, have failed to consider the potential of trauma reverberating; that is, not only are these experiences potentially traumatic for individual children but also potentially traumatic for their families. To date, the literature on school suspension has failed to capture this phenomenon with the exception of a handful of studies. One example is Dunning-Lozano’s (2018) concept of “secondary discipline” – a term coined by the author to describe “the frequent and harmful extension of zero tolerance school discipline to parents” (p. 2). In this study of secondary discipline, Dunning-Lozano spent several years at a disciplinary

alternative school in Texas for students in grades 6-12 and found that Black and Latina mothers were subjected to the same punitive disciplinary practices as their children. The author found that these punitive forms of discipline reproduced racist, classist and gendered inequalities, which were exposed in the form of racist stereotypes and forced parent engagement. This study is one of the first of its kind and highlights the need to probe more and delve deeper into how these parents and families are being impacted and potentially traumatized as a result of these harmful practices. This dissertation seeks to fill this gap through employing the concept of collective trauma – a framework that is not common in education, but one that has the potential to capture the stories that Black families have been telling – dating back to the cries of Black students and parents of desegregation.

### **The Reverberation of Trauma**

To date, few researchers have captured the impact of school suspension disparities beyond the individual child to consider a child’s family and community, which is especially important for capturing the stories and experiences of Black children. In addition, there is no empirical research that has captured the impact of school suspension disparities for young children and also their families. As one Black mother said to me, “I know that the school-to-prison pipeline is framed as a youth issue and it is, but the younger the child the harder it is [for parents].” Furthermore, even though the school-to-prison pipeline and similar framings have exposed the impact of school suspension – that is children being pushed out of schools, stripped from their families and thrown into prison cells – scholars have been slow to characterize this harm and suffering as trauma. However, as is illustrated in the Black mother’s statement above (Parker, 2018), Black parents have explicitly characterized their experiences as trauma. To this end, in this section, I characterize the residue, for the children and their families, that remains beyond the act of suspension as the scars of collective trauma. Here, I argue that collective

trauma is a framework that lends itself to validating the testimonies of Black parents whose stories suggest that school suspension is much more than an unfortunate outcome for their children. Instead, I argue that school suspension has what one might characterize as ripple effects of trauma for Black children and their families. Considering this, the following section describes the concept of collective trauma, which includes an overview of the framework's origin, its key tenets and an overview of scholars who have studied disasters through collective trauma.

### **“Looking for Scars”**

Trauma scholarship in education has been most commonly studied at the individual level – that is psychological and physical trauma. More often than not, scholars have linked a child's inability to cope with psychological or physical trauma as reasons for their “bad” behavior (Darensbourg, Perez & Blake, 2010; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). In other words, these scholars have asserted that trauma as a result of an experience outside of school contributes to children acting out in school. This characterization of bad behavior, perhaps unintentionally, places the blame on the child's behavior, and on parents who did not prevent the behavior. These particular framings, even if unintentional, have fed into the idea that schools themselves are not sites of trauma but rather institutions that serve people with trauma. Because of this, we have often overlooked the historical evidence of schools inducing trauma on People of Color (e.g. American Indian Boarding Schools). Despite the readily available information about the way schools have been sites of harm and trauma for People of Color, popular media and layman's notions of schooling are of schools as “great equalizers” rather than as sites of trauma. Only recently, in 2016, did education scholars Alvarez, Milner IV & Delale-O'Connor (2016) coin the term “school-induced racial trauma” which gave us the language to consider “unsuspected, unrecognizable trauma” (p. 28) in schools.

The ways in which trauma is recognized and acknowledged in schools may disallow certain experiences to “count” as traumatic experiences. In particular, the dominant view of trauma invalidates other forms of trauma...race is one invisible factor at the core of many unrecognized traumatic experiences. Racial discrimination and racial incidents are prevalent in schools and broader society, and there is strong evidence that people of color experience high-stress levels and exposure to traumatic events as related to both overt and covert racism (Alvarez, Milner IV & Delale-O’Connor, 2016, pp. 28-29).

This dissertation contributes to the scant literature on school-induced racial trauma.

Additionally, I argue that as this literature continues to emerge, there is a need for us re-position the role of schools with respect to society and consider the role that schools have historically played in reproducing and upholding racism and anti-Blackness, including studying the aftermath. Additionally, through the usage of collective trauma, I go beyond merely acknowledging that schools have induced racial trauma to examine how the experience of the school suspension of young Black children has impacted Black families. As Black parents have reminded me, Black children are not raising themselves.

### **Collective Trauma**

Erikson (1976), who first defined this theoretical framework, captured the collective trauma of a coal mining community after a flood tore through their town on a hillside in Logan County, West Virginia. According to Erikson (1976), he was “looking for scars” as he developed his analysis through several different forms of data, including qualitative interviews and questionnaires. By the time Erikson began his fieldwork, the debris as a result of the flood had cleared away and the physical scars were no longer visible, however; according to Erikson, “the worst damage... was done to the minds and the spirits of the people who survived the disaster, and it is there that one must begin the search for scars” (p. 135). Erikson continued:

Two years after the flood, one still met adults on the creek whose faces darkened in anguish as they told stories of “the water” and one still met children who had not spent a single night in their own beds since the flood or who still went to sleep fully clothed “just in case.” The flood was with them always (p. 135).

As Erikson developed his analysis, his findings suggested that the community experienced trauma in “two closely related but nonetheless distinguishable facets,” which to him were both “individual trauma and collective trauma” (p. 153). Erikson (1976) defined individual trauma as “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively; and collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages bonds attaching people together and impairs prevailing sense of communality” (p. 154). Erikson believed that even though collective trauma did not have the “quality of suddenness normally associated with trauma,” it was still a “form of shock” (p. 154). Erikson wrote about both forms of trauma as closely related, yet distinct as he suggested, both forms of trauma “occur simultaneously and are experienced as two halves of a continuous whole” (p. 154). Most significantly, in his book, Erikson pushed against traditional definitions of trauma and challenged notions of what counts as trauma as he asserted the following:

...we would classify an event as disaster if it had the property of bringing traumatic reactions... we would presumably want to keep quotation marks around the term “disaster,” because the intent... is not to offer a new dictionary meaning for an old word but to suggest that there are any number of happenings in human life that seem to produce the same effects as a conventional disaster without exhibiting the same physical properties (p. 254).

Furthermore, Erikson suggested that groups such as those living on skid rows, in immigrant quarters and even in Black ghettos “are survivors of disaster and that the pain reflected in their faces is a form of trauma” (p. 132). As is illustrated in the excerpt above, the way that Erikson conceptualized and redefined trauma pushed past traditional definitions of trauma, which in turn allows us to consider who has been left out of trauma conversations; almost suggesting that no trauma should be left behind. Considering this, though Erikson does not explicitly lay out a list of tenets for collective trauma, the section that follows was developed through consideration of the lines of inquiry that Erikson laid out for researchers. Erikson

challenged researchers to “look for scars, “not only in lives of survivors’ minds but in the tissues of their social life as well” (p. 155).

### *Tenets of Collective Trauma*

Throughout the text, Erikson (1976) suggested that the work of making trauma visible or as he calls it “looking for scars,” requires researchers to do several things, including:

1. Establish a baseline of trauma before the event or “disaster” occurred; researchers “must know something about who they were and where they came from, how they organized their lives and what they asked of the future”;
2. “Locate a people in a larger sweep of history and on the wider social and cultural map.”
3. “Look for scars,” for which Erikson provided the following signs of collective trauma:
  - Gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of self has disappeared;
    - “I” continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed; “You” continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But “we” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body;
    - Cultural sense of disorientation, a feeling of powerlessness, a dulled apathy, and a generalized fear about the condition of the universe.

Guided by these tenets, in Erikson’s work with flood survivors, the author constructed narratives and used excerpts from interviews to make collective trauma visible. Since then, a handful of scholars have taken up the scholarship of collective trauma. To gather a sense of how collective trauma has evolved since Erikson (1976), the next section offers an overview of key scholars engaged in lines of inquiry in the realm of collective trauma.

## **Collective Trauma Scholarship**

Even though Erikson developed collective trauma in the 1970s, scholarship on collective trauma is still in its infancy as trauma scholars, especially in the United States, have tended to focus more on individualized forms of trauma. One of the limitations of this framework is the infancy of this scholarship, however; over the past two decades, this scholarship has slowly increased. Unfortunately, to date, collective trauma has not been studied in education scholarship, so the following section highlights scholars outside of education who have continued to push for ways to capture trauma at the collective level in hopes of offering a lens for education scholars to think about what it might look like to study collective trauma in education. More often than not, collective trauma scholarship has focused on populations affected by wars or natural disasters. For example, Abramowitz (2005) used collective trauma to interrogate systems reports and narrative accounts of war-affected populations in West African civilian populations. Abramowitz, who was primarily concerned with “destruction or loss of the social self” (p. 2107), sought out to re-frame scholarship on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), typically framed as an individual form of trauma. Abramowitz argued that PTSD – in addition to its individually traumatic characteristics – was also a form of collective trauma.

Similarly, Somasundaram (2007) conducted a qualitative psychosocial-ecological study to examine collective trauma in Northern Sri Lanka after war and a tsunami. Somasundaram found that more than the natural disaster, this population was extremely impacted at the collective level after war. The author found collective trauma wounds visible at the family, community and society levels, which was made visible through participatory observation, key informant interviews and focus group discussion with community-level relief and rehabilitation workers and government and non-government officials. In this study, collective trauma was

evident in the form of increased single-parent homes, lack of trust, changes in significant relationships and child-rearing practices.

Through a historical analysis, Nytagodien & Neal (2004) wrote about collective trauma and collective guilt as a result of apartheid in South Africa. According to the authors, traumas cannot be buried in the past. Instead, the authors asserted that these traumas resurface and reappear in intrusive flashbacks. Additionally, the authors suggest that stories – the telling and retelling – are necessary for the healing process. The authors went onto say:

The enduring effects of such policies as slavery, apartheid, or genocide cannot be fully attenuated by a single act of legislation or economic restitution for victims. Instead, full exposure of the ugliness of the past, in its many guises must necessarily become an ongoing process. Popular music, novels, movies, television documentaries, and many other forms of mass culture are necessary supplements to state-crafted apologies and restitution. Extensive reworking of the data from the past is necessary for the creation of a more viable national identity and sense of moral community (p. 474).

In their report, Nytagodien & Neal (2004) offered examples of events that resulted in collective trauma, including slavery and the Jim Crow era – both forms of collective trauma shared amongst Black people in the United States. In that same way, trauma scholar Eyerman (2004) studied trauma and slavery and asserted the following:

As opposed to psychological or physical trauma which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion. In this sense, the trauma need not necessarily be felt by everyone in a group or have been directly experienced by any or all (p. 160).

Eyerman, whose work is mostly concerned with cultural trauma – a form of collective trauma that requires some form of collective representation, believed that the trauma and collective memory of slavery are what Black intellectuals used to construct African American identity, or as he wrote:

There is a difference between trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process. As a cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and



linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory. The notion of a unique identity emerged in the post-Civil War period, after slavery had been abolished. The trauma of forced servitude and of nearly complete subordination to the will and whims of another was thus not necessarily something directly experienced by many of the subjects...but came to be central to their attempts to forge a collective identity out of its remembrance. In this sense, slavery was traumatic in retrospect, and formed a “primal scene” which, potentially, unite all “African Americans” in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa (Eyerman, 2001, pp. 1).

Though Eyerman’s scholarship is on cultural trauma, it is still rooted in Erikson’s framing of collective trauma. What is also fascinating about both Eyerman’s work on trauma and Nytagodien & Neal’s scholarship is the authors’ inclusion of the reproduction of trauma, which Eyerman (2001) breaks down as the reproduction of the “trauma of rejection,” and the “effects and affects of slavery on the Black psyche,” (p. 39). These authors’ work of studying the reproduction of trauma are helpful in establishing a baseline of trauma historically for Black families in the United States. Similarly, these works illustrate how Erikson’s framing of collective trauma can be used to examine race and all of its complexities.

### **Collective Trauma and School Suspension Disparities**

It is important to note that the flood survivors from which Erikson defined collective trauma were all white people – meaning that Erikson did not intentionally design collective trauma to examine race. However, even if not by design, collective trauma is useful in examining race, particularly as it relates to research with and for Black people, for at least three reasons. First, this framework does the work of relocating Black children with their families, which is something that most scholarship has failed to do. Second, and related to the first reason, studying the collective rather than merely the individual is a practice rooted in African philosophy, which makes the case for this framework’s cultural relevance.

African philosopher, Mbiti (1989) believed that “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am,” This philosophy and the collective trauma framework suggest that if a child

experiences trauma then it should be expected that the family and the community of that child is also at risk of experiencing some form of trauma. By the mere exploration of collective trauma, using this framework with and for Black people speaks to the cultural relevance of this framework as both a theoretical and analytical framework. Third, embedded in the first two tenets of collective trauma (establish a baseline of trauma before the event or “disaster” occurred and locate a people in a larger sweep of history), are ways for scholars to place what it is happening in schools in a historical context that considers the ways in which these disparities in schools are reproductions of historical trauma – dating back to slavery, which is imperative for educational scholarship, especially as it relates to the overlap of social control and discipline in society, including schools. This is equally important for research with and for Black parents because parents, themselves, have been funneled through and even pushed out of schools. Being able to capture their past and present allows us to think about intergenerational trauma, historical trauma and collective trauma all at once.

*They blame me; it's my fault,*

*But I'm sending you my best child,*

*I teach them to do as they taught,*

*But I can't lie, I'm falling apart,*

*And we ain't never had a right to feel, so I'll make this short,*

*Just tired of being denied the right to feel what I'm feeling,*

*Always expected to be the healer, but not worthy of healing.*

### **Track 3: Methodology**

*“The most important stories in history can be diluted by statistics and impersonal.... I had to bring it back down to earth and focus on a single truth - these were people.” - Toni Morrison*

#### **Introduction**

In this study, I examined the impact of early childhood school suspension on Black families. Although research on the school-to-prison pipeline highlights the structural and ideological components of school suspension and speaks to the danger of this practice, frequently overlooked is the emotional and psychological scarring - not only for children funneled through the school-to-prison pipeline but also for those who escape the pipeline. Additionally, absent from narratives about school suspension is the impact it has on the family unit - particularly during early childhood education – a time when “children’s brains are developing rapidly” and are heavily “influenced by the experiences, both positive and negative, that they share with their families, caregivers, teachers, peers, and in their communities” (U.S. Department of Education and Health & Human Services, 2014, p. 1). Furthermore, not only are these experiences absent, the voices and perspectives of these families are as well. Therefore, the goal of this study was to privilege the perspectives and experiences of Black parents whose young children had been suspended.

In order to capture their lived realities, I employed an arts-based (read poetic) narrative research methodology (Lafrenière & Cox, 2012) – an approach that is often used to “illuminate the life circumstances of individuals and communities, particularly those circumstances that deepen forms of harm and exclusion (Squire et. al, 2014, p. 74); give voice to survivors’ stories; help us “grasp some of the complexity, multiplicity and contradiction within lives” (p. 77); help us “understand some psychological aspects of human functioning” (p. 82); “give us a picture of

the social worlds, communities and generations of which [participants] speak” (p. 84); and address sensitive topics and events. These narratives were constructed from qualitative interviews with a cross-country sample of 14 Black parents, each of whom had at least one child who had been suspended while in grades pre-K through 3rd grade.

In this chapter, I remind the reader of the research question that guided the focus of this study. I elaborate the rationale for art-based narrative research and its importance for this study; describe the recruitment and selection process for participants as well as demographic and descriptive information about participants; and detail the analytic process I used to examine the data I collected.

### *Research Question*

More often than not, school suspension and the consequences of school suspension has been captured through a statistical lens, such as days of lost instruction and comparison of suspension rates amongst peers. Study after study has arrived at the same conclusion: Black students are the most suspended students in the United States. However, conversations with Black parents and noticeable silences gaps in the literature indicate a need to go beyond knowing who is most suspended and how it merely impacts the classroom to consider how Black families *are experiencing* school suspension in addition to the school-to-prison pipeline, especially for families with young children who have been suspended as these parents carry most of the weight and responsibility. Considering this, in this study I examined the self-reported experiences of Black parents of suspended children by asking the following research question: How do Black parents describe their experiences of having a young child suspended from school?

## **Research Design and Approach**

As Polkinghorne (2007) writes, “narrative research is the study of stories” (p. 471). Because I was especially interested in studying *the stories* of Black parents, I employed a narrative research design guided by a naturalist epistemological approach – an approach that “considers narratives as a medium to analyze the lives of storytellers” (Squire et. al, 2014, p. 96). This approach is typically used to gather rich descriptive stories about significant issues (McAlpine, 2016). The limited literature on the impact of school suspensions on Black families and the absence of empirical reports that employ Black parents’ voices pointed to this approach as an approach to analyze the stories that parents told about their experiences of having a child suspended from school. Using narrative research, as McAlpine (2016) asserted, I was able to ask questions about the importance of an experience to the person sharing the story. Additionally, I employed a naturalist approach because it has most often been used to explore trauma cases (Frost, 2011).

## **Altar Call: Participant Recruiting and Sampling**

Historically, in the Black church, during a typical Sunday worship service, there is a moment when the church’s pastor invites the congregation to the altar call, which is an opportunity for the hurting and the hopeful to make their way to the center of the church to be listened to and prayed for. Having spent a great deal of my life in a Black church, I have been able to witness the cumulative effect of the first congregant making her way to the altar call. I have drawn on this tradition of alter calling to describe the process of recruiting and sampling of participants for this study.

After I publicly shared my story of having two sons, who were just 3 and 4 years old, suspended from school, other Black parents contacted me to share their own stories of having a child suspended from school. I suggest that the publicizing of my experience, and my pain, can

be characterized as an altar call. Some Black parents, around the country, who heard “my call” came; they contacted me and shared their hurt, their pain. Thus, rather than traditional approaches to the recruiting and sampling of participants, I allowed the cumulative effect of my public sharing to guide this study using what my colleague and I (Powell & Coles, 2020) have termed altar call sampling. We define altar call, an investigator-prompted sampling, as a method that is rooted in humanizing approaches to research (see Paris, 2011; Paris & Winn, 2013), which breaks down the barriers between researcher and researched by leading with self-examination and self-sharing, thus also situating the researcher as a research participant, in part. Similar to snowball sampling, altar call is connected to networks. However, unlike snowball sampling, where one participant provides a pointer to another participant, in an altar call methodology, the researcher uses her own lived experience as an entry point into research recruitment, understanding that there are limits in seeking to make sense of the world (i.e. people, systems, and institutions) solely through their individual realities (Powell & Coles, 2020).

As my colleague and I (Powell & Coles, 2020) wrote:

Therefore, the altar call is rooted in a networked knowing or linking similarly situated lived experiences together to understand that one is not alone in regard to how they experience particular phenomena. Rather than positioning themselves as disconnected from a distinct community or cultural group who is seeking to study them, the researcher locates themselves as an authentic member of the community and cultural group who is seeking to study the us (p. 6).

Unlike traditional snowball sampling, the researcher has experienced the pain. It is a public issue that is also a private trouble. Because of this, while snowballing is concerned reach, altar call sampling is about recognition. Thus, when engaging in altar call sampling, there is no expectation of how many people will participate, but rather the emphasis and expectation relies on the safety and comfort that the space produces, which allows all those who are interested to unload their burdens and be recognized. Additionally, while churches are thought to be

welcoming spaces for all - even if unintentionally - participation is bound by a host of factors such as geographic location and the time and date of services. Similarly, while not intentional, this particular sampling method was bound by parents' access to me and my story. In some cases, as in snowball sampling, one participant told another to contact me. For example, in some cases, participants' friends were familiar with my story. But in the predominance of the study's participants, this was not the case. Some learned about my story through news outlets and social media platforms as they searched for answers to make sense of their own experiences. Therefore, the research I present here was not driven by finding a predetermined number of participants, but rather engaging those who had the desire to share and be in community around the collective struggle of grappling with the suspensions of their Black children; those wanting and with access to come to the altar.

### *Participants*

This study shares the experiences of 14 Black parents, (the term parents, here, is used broadly to include legal guardians), of children between the ages of 2 and 9 years old. The following is an overview of the shared characteristics across participants:

- Participants all self-identified as Black;
- All participants had at least one child suspended while in grades preschool through 3rd grade;
- All participants' children attended a public school at the time/s they were suspended;
- They represent seven different cities throughout the West Coast, Midwest and southcentral part of the United States.

Additionally, as I will describe in detail as part of each parent's profile, there was variation across participants' age, socio-economic status and the length of time between participants' interviews and their actual experience of having had a child suspended from school.

### *Participant Profiles*

1. Nylah is in her 40s. She resides on the West Coast with her son, who is 5 years old, and her daughter – a high school senior with hopes of joining the military after graduation. Nylah - who has a master's degree - works in the healthcare profession. She describes herself as a working parent who makes too much money to receive government assistance, but not enough money. Nylah's daughter has never been in trouble at school. However, her son was suspended multiple times and eventually expelled when he was just 3 years old. At the time of our interview, two years had passed since her son was suspended from school.
2. Grandma Tessa, who is in her 50s, lives in the West Northern Central Division of the Midwest. She is going back to school in hopes of earning a bachelor's degree. This is her second time around as a parent. She raised her own kids, and now has custody of her daughter's four children because she did not want to see them in foster care. Since adopting them, she uses the term grandchildren and children interchangeably. The second oldest of her children, who is now 9 years old, was first suspended and eventually expelled from a public daycare when he was 3 years old. With the exception of first grade, he has been suspended at every grade level and currently attends a public behavioral alternative school. At the time of our interview, Grandma Tessa was still working through the aftermath of suspension, which is what ultimately led to her grandson being sent to a behavioral alternative school.



3. Patrice is in her early 30s. She resides in the south-central part of the United States and is currently pursuing a master's degree in sociology. She is a mother of two young children – a son and a daughter, who are less than two years apart. Her children's father is currently incarcerated - but has tried to be as active as possible, even while in jail. When I first interviewed Patrice, she told her kids' father about the study and he shared his experience of having been suspended from school before eventually dropping out. Now, as parents, both Patrice and her kids' father, have experienced both of their children having been suspended from school. Their son was suspended once from daycare when he was just 2 years old for taking off his clothes. Their daughter has been suspended multiple times over the past two years, with the first suspension at just 3 years old. Her daughter was still being suspended from school after our interview.
4. Derrick is in his early 30s. He lives in the south-central part of the United States. He is married and has six children – three sons and three daughters. He is also a volunteer football coach and coaches the teams that his sons play on. Derrick's highest level of education is high school. His wife is college educated. All three of Derrick's sons have received some form of exclusionary discipline. Derrick reached out to me to share the experience of the youngest of his three sons, who was suspended and sent to an alternative school in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. When I interviewed Derrick, it had been about two months since his son was suspended.
5. Brad is in his late 30s and also resides in the south-central part of the United States. He is married with three children – a stepson and two daughters of his own. He and his wife - both college-educated and who both earn six-figure salaries - own several small businesses together. Their oldest two children have never received any form of punitive discipline. His youngest child, a daughter, who is 4 years old, has been suspended and

expelled from multiple preschools and daycares. I interviewed Brad during the same school year that his daughter was being suspended from school.

6. Christina is in her early 30s. She also resides in the south-central part of the United States and has two children – a son and a daughter who are both in elementary school. While in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, her son was suspended and sent to an alternative school for 15 days. Christina’s highest level of education is high school, but she has plans of going to college.
7. Renee is in her early 30s and resides in the midwestern part of the United States. She has a master’s degree and is the mother of one son – a son she’s mostly raised alone. He is 5 years old and in kindergarten. She works for a nonprofit and is very active and involved in her community, often as the spearhead of community initiatives focused on peace, healing and restoration in her community. I interviewed Renee during the same school year that her son was suspended from school.
8. Trina – who is in her 50s – lives alone now. All three of her children are grown, including her only son who was suspended multiple times as a child in early childhood education. Without a formal college education, Trina owns several small businesses and also hosts a podcast that focuses on education and parenting. She resides in a city in the south-central part of the country. More than 25 years had passed since Trina’s son was suspended from school.
9. Constance, also from the south-central part of the country, has three sons. She is in her 30s. Her highest level of education is a high school. She works for the state in which she resides in. Only one of her sons, who was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade at the time, has been suspended from school. I interviewed Constance a year after her son was suspended from school.
10. Nia recently moved to the East Coast but is from the midwestern part of the country, which is where her son was suspended multiple times when he was just 3 years old.

During that time, Nia was pursuing a bachelor's degree at a university that also had a preschool, which is where Nia's son was suspended. She eventually dropped out of school to advocate for her son. Nia, who was also going through a divorce during the same time her son was suspended, has since remarried. She is in her early 40s. I interviewed Nia seven years after her son's last suspension.

11. Lyric, who is in her mid-30s, recently moved to the West Coast to pursue a PhD in education. Her hometown is located in the East Northern Central Division of the Midwest, which is where her son was suspended when he was in 3rd grade. She is the mother of three children, two daughters and a son. Lyric has battled against an autoimmune disease for many years and was especially sick during the time her son was suspended from school. It had been more than five years since Lyric's son was suspended from school.
12. Tiffany, who is in her early 30s, resides in the south-central part of the country in a vibrant all-Black, middle-class neighborhood with her two children, a son and a daughter. She is divorced but still has a good co-parenting relationship with her ex-husband. Tiffany has a bachelor's degree and works in the banking industry. Her son was suspended during his kindergarten year. I interviewed her a year later.
13. Porsha, who is in her late 40s, resides in the Northwest Central Division of the Midwest. She is the mother of three children, two sons and a daughter. She is an activist and an educator who holds two master's degrees. Both of her sons were suspended from school multiple times. Our interview primarily focused on her youngest son, who has autism, and was repeatedly suspended in early childhood education despite his disability. It had been about 10 years since her children were suspended.

14. Chris, who is in his mid-20s, lives on the West Coast with his two sons and his girlfriend and her three daughters. His oldest son, a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader, has been living with him for two years. His youngest son has been living with him for a few months and is in kindergarten. Chris' highest level of education is high school. His girlfriend is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree. He is an aspiring rap artist and stay-at-home dad. I interviewed Chris during the same school year that both of his sons were being suspended from school.

### **Data Collection**

Early on, I experimented with a variety of qualitative forms of data collection to understand this phenomenon. Though I do not consider this study to be an ethnography, I took an ethnographic perspective with the belief that there were several common elements of participants' experiences, but those features, and when and how parents communicated their experiences, varied beginning with the first few interviews. To this end, over the course of this two-year study, parents had the autonomy to decide on what, of the suspension experience and aftermath, they wanted to share, how often they wanted to share (that is, during one interview, or over several interviews), as well as which qualitative medium made sense for them to share. Parents shared through a host of different media and not every parent chose the same medium. These media included in-depth interviews, informal conversation, focus groups, journal entries and observation.

The research presented in this study focuses on in-depth qualitative interviews (Johnson, 2002) with each of these parents. The decision to employ a narrative approach was birthed out of these in-depth qualitative interviews. Participants spoke in stories with very little interruption from me. In addition to sharing in other ways, all 14 parents shared their experiences through one-on-one qualitative interviews. This style of interviewing was used due to the intentionality to "build

on intimacy” and the desire to “resemble the forms of talking one finds among close friends” (Johnson, 2002, p. 104). While this style of interviewing was used to replicate, as much as possible, the ways friends informally discuss events and experiences in their lives, I explained to the participants, that I was obtaining information for research purposes (Johnson, 2002) for my dissertation study. Thus, I acknowledge the potential tensions of power that may have been present, despite earnest efforts to eliminate such power differentials.

The data presented here is drawn from individual interviews with each participant that ranged from 55 to 90 minutes in length based on the following specific grand tour question (Leech, 2002): *Tell me about the time or time(s) your child was suspended from school.* Initially, I chose to start off each interview with a grand tour question in an attempt to disrupt any bias that I may have had around the topic of school suspension. Ultimately, after deciding on a narrative approach, the decision to use a specific grand tour question worked well because specific grand tour questions are designed to spark dialogue and get participants talking in a focused way (Leech, 2002).

These interviews were divided into two sections: the details of the experience (Seidman, 2013) – specific to sharing stories about their child or children being suspended from school – and focused life history interviews (Seidman, 2013) – framed around parents’ childhood and schooling experiences. Interviews, including the structure of the interviews, were driven by participants’ responses to the guiding question. Twelve participants were interviewed via phone and two at their home. Ten of the interviews were audio-recorded; the other four were recorded via field notes. Interviews were transcribed, and identifiable information was removed from each of the transcripts. All names are pseudonyms and some identifying details have been changed to protect the identities of the families.

It is important to note that while I had my own share of experiences, I did not believe my own personal experiences to be the only form of the suspension and resultant experiences of the participants. It was my interest in uncovering the untold or invisible stories of Black parents and the suspensions of their children that set this project in motion. Additionally, this desire to uncover these experiences framed the interactions between participants and me. The in-depth structure of the interviews was designed to give parents the space to share their individual experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The codes in which I organized the data around were directly influenced by the construction of the theoretical framework that guided this study. In particular, through an approach similar to grounded theory analytic approaches, after reviewing transcripts from the first five participant interviews, re-reviewing the data and assigning codes to the data, I was strategic about reading the remaining nine interviews through the lens of collective trauma, the theoretical framework that ultimately guided this study. Uncommon to educational research, the identification and ultimate employment of collective trauma was employed based on the first cycle coding, which consisted of (1) descriptive codes and (2) grouping similar descriptive codes into larger conceptual categories (Saldaña, 2015). The second cycle of coding consisted of (1) re-coding for sub-codes in efforts to refine initial descriptions and (2) explicating In Vivo codes. Finally, because the theory of collective trauma aligned with the themes derived from the data, the In Vivo codes were organized using the three major themes (read scars) of collective trauma, which include (1) loss of communality, (2) loss of self and (3) feelings of powerlessness. Additionally, one other major theme derived from the

data collected, and so even though it was not outlined in Erikson's conception of collective trauma, I added resistance as a fourth and final theme.

### *Collective Trauma as an Analytical Framework*

Kai Erikson, who defined the term in 1976, defined collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages [the] bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (p. 154). Erikson went on to say that although collective trauma does not have the “quality of suddenness normally associated with trauma,” it still is a “form of shock” (p. 154). The author talks about both forms of trauma - individual and collective - as closely related, yet distinct as he suggests, both forms of trauma “occur simultaneously and are experienced as two halves of a continuous whole” (p. 154). Considering this, as an analytic framework, I reviewed transcripts with a particular focus on what the process of school suspension looked and felt like for these families and paid close attention to the stories parents told about school suspension damaging bonds and impairing a sense of belonging.

### *Tenets of Collective Trauma*

While not explicitly identified in the text, Erikson lays out a set of tenets for making the trauma visible, or “looking for scars,” that can be broken down as follows:

1. Establish a baseline of trauma before the event or “disaster” occurred; researchers “must know something about who they were and where they came from, how they organized their lives and what they asked of the future”;
2. “Locate a people in a larger sweep of history and on the wider social and cultural map.”
3. “Look for scars,” for which Erikson provided the following signs of collective trauma:

- Gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of self has disappeared;
- “I” continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed; “You” continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But “we” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body;
- Cultural sense of disorientation, a feeling of powerlessness, a dulled apathy, and a generalized fear about the condition of the universe.

The first two tenets (establish a baseline of trauma and locate people in history) were captured in the interview technique I employed through Seidman’s (2013) details of the experience and the focused life history interviews. The third tenet, which presents an analytic framework in which to make use of collective trauma allowed me to assign chunks of data to the following codes: loss of communality, loss of self and feelings of powerlessness. As I previously stated, because this framework did not capture resistance – a major theme that derived from parents’ stories - I added this theme. According to Denham (2008), resistance as a response to trauma, while not present in Erikson’s theory of collective trauma, is still important for conversations around trauma.

### *Narrative Selection*

The four major scars of the study are (1) loss of communality, (2) loss of self, (3) feelings of powerlessness and (4) resistance. To present the data, I constructed analytically informed



narratives, short stories, to capture the essence of each parent's interview. After I constructed a narrative for each parent, I wrote hip hop verses based on the narratives I wrote for each parent.

As I will further explain in the chapter that follows, I constructed one song for each scar for a total of four songs. Each of the four songs is centered on a representative parent's testimony with the intent that each of these four testimonies would serve as a representative testimony. Additionally, short excerpts and verses from other parents are featured on each of these four songs, not because they are different or in contrast but rather to serve as supporting testimony, sort of like an "amen" in church. The decision on which testimonies would serve as the representative testimony was a difficult decision because each parent's story told its own story of collective trauma. However, despite being in different parts of the country and representing seven cities throughout the country, these stories were very similar. Because of this, the criteria for selecting these representative testimonies were bound by the language that a parent used to describe a particular theme and the strength of their description. For example, when Derrick talked about his son being suspended and then sent to an alternative school, he described the principal's decision as a "sentencing." Prior to Derrick using the word "sentencing," neither of us had mentioned the school-to-prison pipeline or prison. Yet, the descriptive language that Derrick used, even if unintentionally, vividly undresses the intertwining between schools and prisons. A final criterion was a check-in with parents to make sure that the representative testimony was actually representative of their experiences.

The overall coding and analytic process was shared with participants to ensure that the interpretation of their personal stories was accurate and reflected what they felt they were saying, even if at the moment of storytelling they did not have the language or the time to organize their thoughts in such a systematic manner. Additionally, after participants were consulted and the

final writing of the findings was complete, I sent a final version to parents, allowing for a secondary process of member checking and trustworthiness to take place (Lincoln & Guba 1986). Participants were given as much time as they needed to review the findings. All 14 parents approved the final rendition.

### *Presentation of the Findings*

Research is often concerned with outcomes, and as Bell (2002) writes, it often disregards the actual experiences of people. Seeking to disrupt this very idea, I employed narrative research because of its ability to empower people to tell their own stories (Chataika, 2005). As Chataika (2005) goes on to say, narrative understanding is “in tune with the pain, aspirations, memories, joys and longings of the human journey,” (p. 3). Additionally, narrative research provides an opportunity for historically marginalized groups, in this case Black parents, to construct knowledge in academic spaces (Canagarajah, 1996). Considering this, it was not only important for me to capture these stories but also to present them in a way that asserted that people matter, their stories and their experiences. On one hand, one could argue that the mere sharing of these stories is enough. However, I argue that sharing these stories in ways that are peculiar to participants would be in opposition to the assertions made above. Therefore, the findings in this dissertation are presented as art-based narratives (Lafrenière & Cox, 2012) to capture cadence, emotion, and resistance. To do this, I couple narrative research with hip hop to utilize the storytelling aspects of hip-hop music to do what Black music has historically done – offer a “resistance mechanism... to assert their visibility in arenas whose majority players deemed them invisible” (Bonnette, 2015, p. 8). I pull from the culture of hip-hop and utilize hip-hop music as a presentation method in the findings section, which is a historically culturally relevant form of storytelling and expression in the Black community or as music mogul, Quincy Jones reminds us:

...hip hop has been closer to the pulse of the streets than any other music we've had in a long time. It's sociology as well as music, which is in keeping with the tradition of Black music in America (as cited in Hilburn, 1997).

Just as narrative research has a history of disrupting elitist scholarly discourses and makes space for marginalized groups (Canagarajah (1996), hip-hop music as a presentation method has historically done the same thing. Further highlighting this point, rapper Busta Rhymes, during an interview, suggested the following:

Hip hop reflects the truth, and the problem is that hip-hop exposes a lot of the negative truth that society tries to conceal. It's a platform where we could offer information, but it's also an escape (as cited in Century, 2002).

Put plainly, if we believe that the one who tells the story holds the power, then as scholars, we must be willing to share, concede and disrupt the power dynamics that exist in the stories we tell and in how those stories are told. Borrowing from Bonnette (2015), hip-hop is the language of resistance that has “brought voice to a segment of the community that was often alienated and dismissed” (p. 48). In this way, the decision to use hip hop music to present the findings of this study is, in part, an act of resistance.

### *Employing Hip Hop Music to Communicate the Findings*

Hip hop music as a presentation and storytelling method contributes to the field of arts-based research – an alternative means of presenting research that includes dance, drama, fiction, poetry and visual arts (Lafrenière & Cox, 2012). In 2012, Lafrenière and Cox developed three-step criteria for assessing arts-based works, which are as follows:

- The art must reflect something significant about the study in a way that does not deny the voices of participants;
- The art must be true to its genre;
- It must be appreciated by the audience (p. 323).

Embodying all three of these criteria, hip hop has always reflected the “social, economic, political, and cultural realities and conditions” of people, particularly youth and Black people, while also “speaking to them in a language and manner they understand” (Aldridge & Stewart, 2005, p. 190). Through the usage of the language and dialect of rapping - one of the elements of hip hop, the aim of this study was to reflect the realities of participants as well as speak to them in a language and manner they understood. In other words, stories have to be told the legitimate way that they are in the community. For decades, the method of storytelling in the Black community has found its way through hip hop music (Bonnette, 2015). Thus, this was not just an intellectual exercise, it was about honoring these stories and centering these stories through the correct and appropriate expression.

In this study, I applied three common storytelling techniques in hip hop music - 1) hip hop’s usage of “the narrative told from an outside perspective – the process of a rapper leaving his or her own shoes and entering new skin, giving a voice to a man, woman, or object who is unfamiliar to the audience” (Phillips, 2017); 2) rhyming at the end of each bar; and 3) hip hop’s usage of repetition.

First, hip hop music’s usage of narratives told from an outside perspective is a method of storytelling that has always been used. Rappers like Slick Rick, Nas, Eminem, J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar are just a handful of the rappers I studied as I put this method into practice. During the writing of this dissertation, I studied some of the aforementioned rappers and created a playlist of eight-to-ten songs told from the outside perspective. I researched the backstories of how each of these songs became to be. The most closely related and best example that I found was from rapper, The Game. In his song, *Never Can Say Goodbye*, the rapper spits three verses from the perspectives of now-deceased rappers Tupac, the Notorious B.I.G. and Eazy E. The Game left his own shoes and entered each of these rapper’s shoes in an attempt to re-live or

recapture the last 10 minutes of each rapper's life. When asked about this song, The Game said that he wanted "to be in Biggie, Pac and Eazy-E's shoes the last 10 minutes of their lives, so I wrote verses as if I were" (Oliveira, 2008). The rapper went on to say that he felt connected to these rappers because of his own near-death experience, having felt like his life was over after he got shot.

As a parent of children who have been suspended from school, much like The Game shared, I feel connected to my participants' experiences, even if the outcomes and enduring effects looked differently. Additionally, and maybe most importantly, The Game's song, *Never Can Say Goodbye*, is an ideal example because the rapper went beyond just telling a story from a different perspective. In this song, The Game imitated each rapper's style, tone and voice, including their pauses and the variance in the speed in which each rapper typically flowed. For example, in his verse told as though he was Tupac, The Game begins with the words, "picture me rollin,'" which is how Tupac began the first verse of his song entitled, *Picture Me Rollin'*. Further, The Game's verse as Tupac has a much faster flow than his verse as the Notorious B.I.G. This example embodies what the findings section of this dissertation does – it tells the story of these parents as if I were these parents while capturing the essence and voice of each parent. Thus, each story is written differently to account for the ways in which parents naturally speak and tell stories.

Next, this study makes use of rhyming and repetition, both common techniques used in hip hop music. Typically rap songs include verses that rhyme at the end of each bar followed by hooks that repeat the same words. Going back to The Game's *Never Can Say Goodbye*, the rapper features singer Latoya Williams on the song who sings a hook that simply repeats the words, "never can say goodbye." Like this, throughout the findings chapter, I have included what

could be thought about as hooks, participants' words that I write over and over to emphasize the themes of parents' stories and experiences.

### *Limitations and Concerns*

Dating back to desegregation, we have known that Black students have been the most suspended students of all students. In 2014, we learned that Black preschoolers were also part of this harmful policy and practice. Missing from the dialogue, more often than not, has always been the stories of Black families – those fighting to save their children from these ills while also trying to save themselves. Thus, this study was a first word and not a final one. The sample size was small, intentionally so, and the sampling method was constructed to allow parents who wanted to share and with access to share to do so on their own terms. While these are indeed limitations, I also believe them to be strengths. It is difficult for people to undress, so to speak, and to share their private sufferings, especially in a research setting and especially for Black people, a group that has historically been harmed by researchers. In this study, I believe that my entry point, being linked by similarly situated experiences, allowed for the sort of dialogue and storytelling that makes up Chapter 4. I also did not want to overwhelm this dissertation with more stories than we, readers, could remember. When I think about some of my favorite storytelling hip hop songs, what I love most is that I remember the names, the stories and the experiences captured in the songs (e.g. the story of Brenda in Tupac's *Brenda's Got a Baby*, Eminem's *Stan*).

Additionally, because this study was first framed by my personal experiences, the bulk of the work of this study was making sure that parents felt comfortable and knew they had the freedom to share their experiences, even if they were different than mine. My family was my first case of collective trauma. I can say that now. However, despite my experiences as both a

child suspended and a parent of children suspended, I did not always have the language of collective trauma. Each time, I buried my experiences as a coping mechanism. As years passed, I never processed or took time to make sense of sense of loss and eventual repair of the relationships between my grandmother and me, and my mother and me. I was not sure why my heart felt like it was in my lap every time I entered a school or why I was near tears every time I saw the school's phone number come across my caller ID. But as parents in this study unpacked their experiences, it forced me to unpack mine. Parents forced me to search the uncomfortable parts of my past as they so vulnerably revealed theirs. Parents sent me on a journey to find a term that captured their experiences. Collective trauma was the only term, to date, that I found that actually captured these experiences. And so, in a certain way, parents probably had much more of an impact on me than I had on them. Still, as is often said, we cannot unsee what we have seen – that is my experiences have shaped and continue to shape who I am as a researcher. I do not shy away from that. Thus, from the preparation for interviews, to the reading of transcripts, coding and analytic phases, I was thoughtful and careful about the work of capturing multiple realities while grappling with my own. My file cabinet is overflowing with scribbled notebooks that detail this experience, that of analyzing and telling stories that were so intertwined with my own. Whether or not I was successful is yet to be seen, and probably something that will always be debatable. However, within my realm of control, during the coding and analytic phase, I employed an interrater reliability strategy with two of my colleagues. They were given raw transcripts and asked to assign small chunks of data to codes that they developed. In each case, my colleagues cited few differences.

In regard to validity, narrative research, alone, arises questions such as “Are the assembled texts understood to reflect their author’s lifeworld? Are they the product of a researcher–author interaction and represent a co-construction? Are they distorted memories or

projections about past events and happenings?” (Canagarajah, 1996, p. 480). To give readers the opportunity to draw their own conclusions, as part of each narrative, I have clearly detailed the nature of the data collected, including how, when and what questions and discussion led to participant responses.

It is also important to note that the Black experience is not singular. The decision to use the term Black was not to assert the contrary, but rather to offer an inclusive way to capture the experiences of families of African descent who are residing in the United States, while still being mindful of uniqueness and individuality.

Finally, hip hop music is meant to be heard, to be performed. In a written document, like a dissertation, performance is lost. However, just as you can use a search engine to look up lyrics to any song, I believe that this dissertation is a lyrical archive of these parents’ stories. I encourage you, the reader, to read chapter four out loud to honor the performance elements of hip-hop music. In doing so, I believe that we also honor these parents through the acknowledgement that their stories are meant to be heard.



#### **Track 4: Testimonies of Collective Trauma**

The question of who, as in who this was written for is a question that I keep coming back to because of the emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspective that I inhabit, that of a Black mother of two children who were subjected to suspension and that of a scholar, a researcher tasked with collecting, analyzing and writing about other people's experiences, in this case – other people's pain. I was cognizant of this duality and attempted to write this chapter in a way that upheld the rigorous and ethical standards of both of these communities. In doing so, I grappled with the tension between the two communities. For centuries, more often than not, research has been about Black people and rarely with or for Black people, which is what propelled my decision to become a researcher in the first place. Put plainly, by Nia, who was one of the first parents I interviewed:

I think that having these conversations and framing is extremely important and it has to be done by those who are directly impacted by this issue and we can't allow other people to frame and talk about our experiences without allowing us to do that ourselves.

I felt like Nia and as a result, I immersed myself between two worlds hoping that one would inform the other; that both my analytic and my felt experience would make me a better researcher and perhaps, a better mother and advocate. I chose to examine school suspension in early childhood education through the stories of Black parents - not because I did not value the voices of their children, but because I wanted to give their children - who were all between the ages of 2 years old and 9 years old at the time of their suspension, the same respect, I gave my oldest two sons when they were suspended - the right to be children. After my sons were suspended from school, I gave them space to share and to feel, and then I took the load and carried it for them, as much as I could. I let them play more. I found ways to make them laugh more. I tried to protect their innocence.

Parents in this study wanted the same for their children. Since sharing their stories, and some well before sharing their stories with me, parents have supported their children's wellbeing - through professional and at-home support. But when it came to re-living what we now know as trauma, parents wanted to carry the load. I let them. And I hope in some way, through the sharing of their (our) stories collectively, they (we) lightened the load for each other.

Still, I never lost sight of the fact that my feet were planted in two very different worlds - one of which was birthed from a place of privilege and power and the other harmed as a result of that privilege and power. The tension was always present, especially during the analytic phase. At times, it felt disingenuous to be analyzing other people's pain, my people's pain. At times, I even felt guilty. The stories they told seemed much more heartbreaking than mine. On the days that it felt like it was too much, a whisper of a parent's voice saying, "Thank you for telling my story," overwhelmed my ears. And on the worst days, I would think back to Nia who reminded me, if the story must be told, "it has to be done" by us - "those who are directly impacted by this issue." Furthermore, what kept me going was not only realizing that I had a story to tell but realizing the moral and ethical obligation I had to get the story right. This was not about me telling the story I wanted to tell or making these parents' experiences my own. It was about listening to their stories and analyzing their experiences, regardless if they were similar or different than mine. And I knew both worlds, academia and the Black community, would hold me accountable.

### *School-Induced Collective Trauma*

Parent narratives led me to employ collective trauma as my analytical framework, which was defined by Kai Erikson (1976) as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (p. 154).

Collective trauma has traditionally been used to assess personal and communal loss for people who have experienced a natural disaster (e.g. survivors of a flood disaster). However, Erikson asserted that man-made disasters could bring about the same traumatic reactions as natural ones. Erikson cited people being forced out of their neighborhoods as a consequence of gentrification and people living on skid row as examples of other forms of collective trauma.

Additionally, Erikson stated that while collective trauma does not have the “quality of suddenness normally associated with trauma,” it still is a “form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of self has disappeared” (p. 154). Adding to this, Erikson (1976) said the following:

As people begin to emerge hesitantly from the protective shells into which they have withdrawn, they learn they are isolated and alone, wholly dependent upon their own individual resources. “I” continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. “You” continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But “we” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body... one must look for scars, then, not only in the survivors’ minds but in the tissues of their social life as well” (pp. 154-155).

To this end, I reviewed transcripts through a lens of collective trauma with a particular focus on the enduring effects of school suspension. I was especially interested in what the experience of having a young child suspended from school looked and felt like for these families, paying close attention to the testimonies parents gave about school suspension damaging bonds, impairing a sense of belonging and scarring the minds and “the tissues of their social life” (Erikson, 1976, p. 155). First, analytically, to look for the three scars that Erikson (1976) associated with collective trauma, I wrote individual narratives for each parent before assigning chunks of narrative data that I suggest reflect (1) loss of communality, (2) loss of self and (3) feelings of powerlessness as well as to a fourth scar that emerged during data analysis - (4) resistance, which is a response to trauma (Denham, 2008).

This chapter is a collection of art-based narratives derived from the testimonies of 14 Black parents, 10 mothers, three fathers and one grandmother, who through the suspension of their young children all experienced this form of collective trauma. In this chapter, I employ hip hop music as a presentation method, through songs in the format of verses and hooks, to illuminate parents' testimonies with the hope of pushing us even further to consider how schools are sites of collective trauma, particularly after a young child has been suspended from school.

### **Presenting through Hip Hop Music**

In this study, I used three popular storying techniques in hip hop music: 1) the narrative told from the outside perspective, a story method that Phillips (2017) described as a method in which “a rapper leaves his or her own shoes and enters new skin, giving voice to a man, a woman, or object who is unfamiliar to the audience;” 2) rhyming at the end of each bar; and 3) repetition. Hip hop music as a presentation and storytelling method contributes to the field of arts-based research - an alternative means of presenting research that includes dance, drama, fiction, poetry and visual arts (Lafrenière & Cox, 2012). In 2012, Lafrenière and Cox developed three-step criteria for assessing arts-based works, which are as follows:

- The art must reflect something significant about the study in a way that does not deny the voices of participants;
- The art must be true to its genre;
- It must be appreciated by the audience (p. 323).

Given these criteria, I employed hip hop music as a presentation method for several reasons.

First, as rapper Busta Rhymes contended:

Hip hop reflects the truth, and the problem is that hip-hop exposes a lot of the negative truth that society tries to conceal. It's a platform where we could offer information, but it's also an escape (Century, 2002).

Additionally, for decades, hip hop music has been what I term here as a FUBU storytelling method - stories for Black people and by Black people. In this sense, my decision to present these testimonies through hip hop music was both recognition of and honoring the storytellers and cultural traditions of storytelling that have come before me and honoring the Black parents who entrusted me to tell their stories to hear these stories in a language that is not peculiar.

Borrowing from Brown (2013) who studies women's narratives of trauma, in each of the interview transcripts, I examined the stories told, what parents said and how they said it, what these stories meant to parents, why the story was constructed and what each story accomplished. Then through the scars, feelings of powerlessness, loss of self, loss of communality and resistance, I constructed analytically informed narratives, short stories, to capture the essence of each parent's interview. After I constructed a narrative for each parent, I wrote hip hop verses based on the narratives I wrote for each parent. This process consisted of interweaving direct quotes from parents with my own narration, in which I have termed remixing. Each song is a dance reflecting what was told to me and my analytical framework, collective trauma. I took minor creative liberties to add a rhyming and repetition scheme to parents' quotes, however; direct quotes from interviews account for the majority of the lyrics in each song.

Finally, as a society, we have intentionally silenced certain groups, especially people of color (Esquivel, Lewis, Rodriguez, Stovall & Williams, 2002). In schools, one of those groups has been Black parents. As a society, we have tried to silence them, and in some cases, refused to hear them (Staigers, 2016). Music has been proven to be a powerful memory tool, (Morton, Kershner & Siegel, 1990; Purnell-Webb & Speelman, 2008). Considering this, hip hop music as a presentation method is me taking an intellectual stance to not only honor their voices, but to do so in a way that has been scientifically proven to make people remember. May these testimonies no longer be silenced, and may they be ingrained in both our heads and our hearts.

## The Scars of School Suspension

In this section, I share the testimonies of parents who have experienced school suspension as a disaster - an event and process that has the “property of bringing traumatic reactions” (Erikson, 1976, p. 254). Through these testimonies, I found that school suspension left enduring traumatic effects, which I refer to as scars - four in particular - (1) feelings of powerlessness (2) loss of self (3) loss of communality and (4) resistance. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the specific number of parents who endured one or more of the four scars.

*Table 1. Number of parents who experienced one or more scars of school suspension*

<b>Scar 1: Feelings of Powerlessness</b>	<b>Scar 2: Loss of Self</b>	<b>Scar 3: Loss of Communality</b>	<b>Scar 4: Resistance</b>
Nylah Nia Chris Brad Patrice Tiffany Derrick Christina Grandma Tessa Renee Constance	Constance Nylah Patrice Chris Renee Trina Nia Brad Christina Lyric	Nylah Grandma Tessa Patrice Chris Derrick Brad Christina Renee Trina	Patrice Nia Tiffany Derrick Lyric Christina Nylah Porsha Grandma Tessa Renee Trina Constance Brad Chris

In the sections that follow, I use songs to capture the ways that parents described their experiences of having a young child suspended from school. There is a total of four songs, each centered on one of the scars of school suspension. I included the voices of all 14 parents but

chose to construct each song through the perspective of a few parents for each of the songs. For example, for feelings of powerlessness, the first three verses of the song are about Nylah's experience before transitioning to three featured verses that detail the experiences of three other parents, Tiffany, Christina and Derrick.

Parents' stories, despite different contexts, were actually very similar. Because of this, the criteria for selecting parents' testimonies for each scar was bound by the language that parents used to describe that particular scar and the strength of their description.

### *Feelings of Powerlessness*

By definition, the first scar, feelings of powerlessness, is a "lack of ability, influence or power," (Oxford, 2020). Additionally, and according to the definition found in Merriam Webster (2020), feelings of powerlessness are associated with authority and resources or a lack thereof. As told to me and remixed by me through hip hop music, a FUBU (for us, by us) method, I share the experiences of four parents that are representative of 11 parents whose testimonies captured the ways that school suspension left the scar of feelings of powerlessness. This song is titled, *Just Nothing*. I begin with Nylah's experience followed by my analysis of what these verses reveal before putting Nylah's verses in conversation with featured verses from three other parents, Tiffany, Christina and Derrick, who also gave testimonies of feelings of powerlessness.

As previously described in this chapter, analytically, I wrote each song by interweaving interview quotes with my own narration using remixing- the process of tweaking a song (e.g. adding or altering verses) "while maintaining what made the original so dope" (Complex, 2013). Additionally, while direct quotes from interviews account for the majority of the lyrics in each song, I took minor creative liberties to add a rhyming scheme to parents' quotes. For example, here are a few bars from the first verse of *Just Nothing*:

*Okay first, I have to give you the background story, it's the only way,*

*It started in preschool with my son running away,*

*He was hitting other kids,*

*Refusing to listen to what his teachers had to say,*

Looking at the first line, Nylah's direct quote was "Okay, first, I have to give you the background story." To her words, I added the words, "it's the only way" for two reasons. Rhythmically, it made it easier for me to flow into the next line, which ends with "away." Additionally, with my decision to use the phrase, "it's the only way," I wanted to capture Nylah's adamance about giving the background story. Finally, I also tried to capture some of the nuances that are often lost in transcription - the pauses, the deep breaths, etc. In the same verse, I wrote "give me a second, let me get myself straight." Nylah never said those words. Instead, she literally paused and took some time to collect herself before sharing her story. These sorts of play on words appear throughout every verse.

Song Title: *Just Nothing*

Nylah's Verse 1

*We gotta make this quick because I'm on my lunch break,*

*I don't feel like talking about this anyway, I got money to make,*

*Wait, I agreed to this, give me a second, let me get myself straight,*

*Please excuse me, it's been a long journey,*

*I don't know how much more I can take,*

*Okay first, I have to give you the background story, it's the only way,*

*It started in preschool with my son running away,*

*He was hitting other kids,*

*Refusing to listen to what his teachers had to say,*



*And before you ask, no, I didn't think it was okay, I  
went straight to the school, they're the experts,*

*Is my son okay?*

*Thinking back now, it's frustrating because I went directly to them,*

*"It's nothing. He's fine. He's adjusting. Just give him time."*

*They said he was okay,*

*And then I got that call, and nothing was okay,*

Hook

*So, there's nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

Nylah's Verse 2

*Suspended, he's only four, how is that okay?*

*(Pauses) It's been a few years, but it hurts like today,*

*But anyway,*

*So, I ask them, what's contributing to this?*

*Why do you think he's behaving like he is?*

*Can we have him evaluated? Is he different than other kids?*

*Wait, suspension, he's too young to understand, he's only four,*

*It didn't matter, they just pushed us out the door,*

*He didn't understand it, but my heart tore,*

*What does this say about me? Is this the seed I bore?*

*And my cries for more,*

*More help, more support, more evaluative tests,*

*Were met with 'he doesn't qualify for services' and looks at me like I wasn't trying my best,*

*Now they got me thinking back,*

*When I had him, was I stressed?*

*Never drank, never smoke, tried to get rest,*

*A single Black mother, but I'm educated,*

*Always thought my kids were blessed,*

*Got their own room, feed them good food, in his class, best dressed,*

*One suspension after another, living my life waiting for the next,*

*Asking if I can appeal,*

*Their response, I never would have guessed,*

Hook

*So, there's nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

Nylah's Verse 3

*Went from suspended to expelled, Four*

*years old, what the hell?*

*Loss of work, emotional distress,*

*Can we run some more tests?*

*My gut tells me that my son needs more support,*

*Something is wrong, but suspensions only distort,*

*Us from the reality of a child in need of help,*

*No one here to help me, hard to do it by myself,*

*Nothing, no resources, still fighting for an appeal,*

*Can hear my mama whispering in my ear, he needs a spanking; give him something he can feel,*

*And what about how I feel,*

*I'm a tired parent, if I'm being real,*

*School won't help, doctors won't either,*

*Suspended and expelled – which one do you think helped? Neither. Year*

*passes, new school finally saying maybe it's ADHD,*

*Still pushing him out, now how does that help me?*

*My private doctor saying that it's autism,*

*Difference between that and ADHD – that's racism,*

*They say my son is 'bad' and only meds can save him,*

**Hook**

*So, there's nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

Nylah originally contacted me via email in 2015. Her son was in preschool at the time and she had read my piece in the Washington Post about my sons' having been suspended in preschool. We stayed in contact periodically, and two years later, I emailed her to see if she wanted to formally share her testimony in the first phase of this study. She initially declined. However, a year later, Nylah contacted me, this time in hopes of being a participant in this study. We scheduled the interview over her lunch hour. When she first got on the phone, I could tell that she was hesitant to share, despite having shared her story with me in length via email. However, a few minutes into our interview, Nylah began dominating the conversation. She rarely paused. In between Nylah's stories, I tried to ask as many interview questions as I could, however; after asking my guiding question (tell me about the time or times your child was suspended from

school), I mostly just listened. I tried to capture some of the essence of Nylah's interview in this song. In most hip-hop songs, artists have verses that are always either eight, 12 or 16 bars in length. In Nylah's song, I intentionally defied those standards in hopes of illustrating the length and complexity of storytelling in her interview. I named this song *Just Nothing* because Nylah repeatedly used that phrase, which was also a phrase capturing the feelings of every parent scared by feelings of powerlessness. Leading up to Nylah feeling as if she got "nothing," Nylah was like most parents in this study; she was excited about her son starting preschool. She was hopeful. She was optimistic and her optimism was connected to the unrelenting belief that Black people have always had - the belief that education is a point of liberation (Du Bois, 1935; Payne & Strickland, 2008). Formerly enslaved Black parents did not want freedom without education for their children. Even still, despite our education system's failure to be that point of liberation, the hopes and dreams of Black parents today are still that of our ancestors. Because of that, initially, Nylah trusted her son's school. She believed they - leadership, teachers, nurses, doctors and counselors - were "experts." Directly quoted and reflected in this song, Nylah says she "went straight to the school" after her son first got into trouble. Nylah says that she had always felt like something was different about her son.

She hoped that the school would help her figure it out. Instead, as is the case in the United States and even globally, Nylah's son did not receive help or support. He was suspended and ultimately, expelled. The school's punitive response is similar to what Gillborn (2015) found when he conducted a similar study in the UK where he found that even for Black middle-class families with social and economic capital, educators failed to recognize a Black child's need. Instead, rather than focusing on a Black child's need, Gillborn found that educators tended to focus on negative labels such as labeling Black kids 'bad', which is what eventually happened to Nylah's son. Still, throughout Nylah's song, it is evident that even though she lost some hope

after her son was suspended from school, she still believed that schools were part of a democratic process. Even after her pleas for help were ignored, Nylah asked about an “appeal process” on more than one occasion, but she was given the same thing - nothing. Her feelings of powerlessness were wedged between the lack of support for her son and her lack of power to be able to appeal, challenge or contest her son’s suspension and expulsion.

Nylah was not alone. Like her, other parents in this study revealed that their feelings of powerlessness were wedged between the lack of support and the lack of power in these school spaces. Tiffany, for example, was just as optimistic about education as Nylah was. Tiffany’s mother was a teacher and Tiffany remembered having a great schooling experience as a child. However, her optimism began to fade after her 5-year old son was suspended from school. Her verse below illustrates another example of how parents experienced feelings of powerlessness.

#### Hook

*So, there’s nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

#### Tiffany’s Verse

*So, I’m like, why would you suspend him?*

*Is it me?*

*Do you think it’s my parenting?*

*Am I not a good parent,*

*Wait, can we discuss this?*

*Can you at least check and see,*

*I know you see me as a Black single mother, but there’s more to me, can’t you see,*

*But she said, no, he’s suspended, quick to label him as B-A-D,*

*I kept asking for a meeting, I'm still waiting for her to get back to me,*

*All I hear is no, never yes or maybe,*

*Involved in the school, but I don't wanna be,*

*If all they see a Black mother who laid on her back and had a baby,*

**Hook**

*So, there's nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

Tiffany was the only parent in this study who came from a family of educators, which seemed to be important to her because it was one of the first things she mentioned. She talked about her educational experiences early on without ever being asked. She held a bachelor's degree and worked in the finance industry. She was recently divorced and co-parenting her two children, a son and a daughter, with her ex-husband. In the verse above, we hear two things that sum up Tiffany's experience. First, Tiffany requested meetings with her son's teacher, but his teacher refused and at times failed to even follow up. His teacher was hard to reach when Tiffany needed her but was quick to call her to inform her about her son's suspension. Second, Tiffany kept feeling like her status as a single Black mother played a role in Tiffany essentially getting nothing, which is not farfetched. Dating back to the 15th century, European travelers used marriage, or a lack thereof, to determine whether or not a people could be categorized as humans or beasts. According to these travelers, Black women and Black men in Africa were not typically married, therefore, they were considered beasts (Morgan, 2004). Nine out of the 14 parents in this study identified themselves as single mothers, including Christina. The following is a verse I

composed that offers a glimpse into the way Christina described her experience of having a child suspended from school.

Hook

*So, there's nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

Christina's Verse

*"You told me that my son had pushed her down, but that is not what he's telling me," that's the first thing I told her,*

*The vice principal talking to me like my son wasn't a child, like he was much older.*

*My son was 6. My daughter was there.*

*"Ma'am, my daughter said he didn't push her down,"*

*"What? She ain't lying, she wouldn't dare,"*

*In the end, our statement didn't matter, the school's did,*

*"How do I appeal?"*

*"You can't,"*

*Suspension and 15 days at alternative school for my kid,*

*I'm a single mother, you can't do this, but they did,*

Hook

*So, there's nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

Christina's son was suspended and sent to alternative school after a fight between him and another student, a white child, broke out. According to the school, Christina's son pushed a teacher down to the floor, who was also white, as she attempted to break up the fight. However, according to Christina's son and her daughter, who was present during the altercation, he did not push the teacher down to the floor. Christina spent a great deal of time talking about her son - how young he was, just 6 years old, and how small he was. She saw an innocence in her son that the school refused to see. This drastic juxtaposition between views, a Black mother's view of her Black child and society's view, is historic. Dumas and Nelson (2016) captured the ways Black boys exist in a world where they cannot be childlike. For Black children, there is little room for error - even for the 6-year-old Black boy who is small in stature and forced to defend himself after another child hits him. In these cases, Black children, more often than not, are viewed as older, less innocent and more blameworthy compared to non-Black children, including Latino children (Gilliam, et. al, 2016; Goff et al., 2014; Morris, 2016).

The only statements that were taken were from the teacher who Christina's son allegedly pushed down to the floor and the vice principal, who admitted that she was not present when the altercation took place. Christina said that her son had never been in any serious trouble before. Given this fact, Christina thought the school would find a way for her son and the other child to work through their differences. Instead, the district informed Christina that her son would be facing an undetermined or specified punitive form of discipline that would be handed down at an official hearing. The hearing was scheduled on a day and time that was not convenient for Christina's work schedule and she was unable to physically be there. Even after the school handed down a punishment that Christina felt was unnecessary, she still had hope that through an appeal, she could get things straightened out. She was wrong. There was no appeal process. Christina, like Nylah, was given nothing.



## Hook

*So, there's nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

Derrick did not come into his experience of having a child suspended with as much hope in the system as Christina and Nylah. As a kid, growing up in the 1990s, he was heavily influenced by gang culture and had made his share of mistakes. But fatherhood changed him. He was a married father of six, and for him, his hope was in his 9-year-old son - who he described as a gifted child who had never been in trouble before.

## Derrick's Verse

*Always thought I was a tough street guy,*

*Looking back, I never was,*

*Got caught up in the gang war, you blood or cuz?*

*Nothing made sense before, now that I'm a father, everything does,*

*Or at least it did,*

*Love all six, but that one - he's gifted,*

*He's different than me,*

*Cool with being smart, always loved school,*

*One time he ain't perfect, now they treating him like he's a fool,*

*Trying not to lose my cool,*

*Never said it was okay, but kids make mistakes,*

*He only in the 3rd grade,*

*Left work, I wanna talk to the principal, I'mma do whatever it takes,*

*But when I saw the principal, I already knew what it was,*

*She sentenced my son, and it took me back to “are you blood or cuz,”*

*She said she knew it was an accident, but somebody had to pay,*

*She was white, I knew what it was; ain't nothing else left to say,*

Hook

*So, there's nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

Derrick's son and two other children were playing with a toy that ricocheted off a table in the school's cafeteria and hit another child in his leg. The child was not severely injured but did need the help of an adult to wipe away blood and apply a band aid. Derrick never tried to make light of the situation. However, as he shared in our interview, Derrick believed the incident, one that the principal acknowledged as an accident, could have been handled “way differently.” Derrick says that his son was “sentenced” to three days of out-of-school suspension and 20 days of alternative school. When he first learned of this, Derrick immediately left work and demanded to talk to the principal. Before meeting the principal, he was prepared to challenge the punishment. However, when Derrick entered the principal's office, the hope he had faded away as he was greeted by a white woman. Derrick says that after he saw the principal, he left the school without ever questioning or contesting the punishment.

Before this encounter, Derrick had never met the school principal. Yet, as soon as he saw her - a “white woman,” he says, he “knew what it was.” For Derrick, there was something about seeing a white woman principal that reminded him of his place in society - just as he had been reminded in years past when he encountered white cops and white judges. In a matter of seconds, Derrick went from a passionate father determined to fight for his gifted son to a Black man who realized that raising a good Black child could not save or protect him or his son. So, he left.

It was difficult for me to listen to parents speak about what they had experienced, especially Derrick. Although Derrick and I never talked about the school-to-prison pipeline and I never used any language that connected the two, he kept using the word “sentencing” when he talked about his son’s punishment. Finally, towards the end of our interview, I pointed out his usage of the word “sentencing” and asked him if he meant to use that language.

Me: At times, it sounds like you’re talking about someone doing prison time. Derrick: That’s what it felt like.

Derrick’s usage of “sentencing” was intentional. Without any knowledge of the school-to-prison pipeline, Derrick made a connection because of his own personal connection with the two worlds - school and prison. It was a heartbreaking experience for him. Street life is what could put you in prison. He understood that about street life. But like Nylah, he viewed education as a point of liberation. Even when he was caught up in street life, he says he always knew that education was the way out. He saw education separate from other systems that disenfranchised Black people. It was not until he walked into the principal’s office that he saw the systems as one in the same.

#### Hook

*So, there’s nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

Eleven of the 14 parents that I interviewed shared stories like Nylah’s, Christina’s and Derrick’s. Even in cases where parents felt that their child had made a mistake or was in the wrong, parents still believed that the exclusionary consequence was uncalled-for. Parents believed that consequences should have been age appropriate with the intent of addressing the cause of the behavior. Throughout this process, one thing was clear: parents reported that they either did not have an opportunity to make the case for their children, or they reported that while

they were provided an opportunity to make a case for their children, they felt that the decision was harsh, likely pre-determined given societal expectations of Black children, and the decisions were not open to appeal or reversal. Their feelings of powerlessness were born out of their own experiences of negative interactions in schools where they believed that they did not have the power to protect or fight for their children despite their desires to do so.

These stories are poignant and deeply entrenched in what it has meant to be Black in the United States. Williams (2012), who chronicled the experiences of formerly enslaved Black Americans, noted that as children many formerly enslaved Black Americans realized “that the parents they loved and looked up to could not shield them from the white people’s power” (p. 28). The author went on to share the testimony of Thomas Lewis Johnson, who did not realize he was enslaved until he was sold to a white man - an all-too-common experience for formerly enslaved Black children where they were unable to escape their feelings of vulnerability and their parents’ feelings of powerlessness.

Sometimes they went to their mothers, as Johnson put it, “ignorantly thinking they could protect us.” But as one after another child was taken away, he came to two realizations. First, “white children were free - ‘free born’ - but black children were slaves and could be sold for money.” And second, their mothers could not protect them (Williams, 2012, p. 28).

One of the enduring traumatic effects of slavery was feelings of powerlessness, a scar that has never completely healed in the United States and throughout the Western hemisphere (Degruy, 2005). Since the time of slavery, this scar has been continually reproduced in the United States, including in schools. Consequently, school suspensions serve as one of the ways in which schools assign meaning to race and reproduce race and racial inequality (Omi & Winant, 1994). I argue that this scar ultimately shapes and alters every schooling encounter that follows for these parents and their children. Schools, then, become sites of trauma where both

parents and their children are reminded “that their parents, the adults who cared about them, were unable to protect them.”

### Hook

*So, there’s nothing to help him; nothing to help me; just nothing*

*Just Nothing*

*Just Nothing*

### *Loss of Self*

It has been more than five years since my sons were suspended from school, but I can still see the scar. I can still feel it. Before JJ and Joah were suspended, I believed I was a good mother. I was proud of myself - the tomboy; the girl who never babysat had figured it out. But after they were suspended, I felt similarly to what Du Bois wrote in 1903:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (p. 8).

It was this double-consciousness - “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” – that 10 out of 14 parents described when they talked about their experiences of having a child suspended from school. In the collective trauma framework, the scar would be categorized as *loss of self*. For some of the parents in this study, loss of self was about the loss of a job or professional title as a result of school suspension. However, for most parents, loss of self was about losing a sense of self. The scar was directly tied to their identity.

The use of the term “identity” here, draws on several scholars, including Wortham (2004), who contended that identity is a “social process through which individuals and groups become identified as publicly recognized categories of people” (p. 761). In part, we are who people say we are. Additionally, I add to Wortham’s definition of identity through Itzigsohn &

Brown's (2015) work on the Theory of Double Consciousness, a theory the authors argue is at the center of the construction and contestation of self-formation as a result of the nonexistent communication and mutual recognition between the racializing and the racialized (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2015). Finally, my conceptualization of identity is influenced by Sfar & Prusak (2005), who argued that identity is a "product of collective storytelling" – stories told by you and stories told about you (p. 18). In this way, here, I believe that stories are part of a racial and racializing social process in which identity is both co-constructed and contested. Considering this, through the stories told by parents, in this section, I try to make sense of identity with a particular focus on loss of self. In what follows, I feature the stories of three parents, Nia, Patrice and Trina, all of whom grappled with loss of self.

Song Title: *I Lost Myself Again*

Nia's Verse 1

*What was your childhood like?*

*It's funny that you ask,*

*It's the 80s, Mama on crack, begging for cash,*

*Cereal and water for breakfast, lunch and dinner,*

*Daddy in the game, grandma say, he's a sinner,*

*Project housing, always home alone,*

*Daddy goes to prison, moved to great grandma's home,*

*I once was lost, took so much to be found,*

*The rose that grew from the concrete ground,*

*I made it, somehow, I survived,*

*I'm a mother now, felt like I had arrived,*

*And then I got that phone call, felt like I had died,*

*“Pick him up,” they said. Didn’t know what to do, so I cried...*

Hook

*I found myself and I lost myself again,*

*What is this?*

*This can’t be happening,*

*Is it a product of my bad parenting?*

*Help me find my way, I think I lost myself again,*

Nia’s Verse 2

*Switched it up, made me change everything,*

*Made me question, maybe I’m not raising a king,*

*I’m lost, felt like my mind was trapped in a ring,*

*“Go to school and be good,” I remember yelling.*

*Years have passed, but in it, I’m still dwelling,*

*Stressed, traumatized, eating more than I should, body swelling,*

*Spanking him, “Stop making things hard for Mommy,”*

*Imma be honest, when this happened, I lost me,*

Hook

*I found myself and I lost myself again,*

*What is this?*

*This can’t be happening,*

*Is it a product of my bad parenting?*

*Help me find my way, I think I lost myself again,*

Nia’s Verse 3

*Working Mama, in school, going through divorce,*

*So, it's just me, Tryna provide, and trying to pass a course,  
But they don't want him there, they never did,  
Dropped out of school, made me choose, I chose my kid,  
Destroyed me, look at what it did,  
Survived the war on drugs, this must be part 2,  
Children don't fully understand, but you do,  
I know better now, negative parenting, I had to undue,*

Hook

*I found myself and I lost myself again,  
What is this?  
This can't be happening,  
Is it a product of my bad parenting?  
Help me find my way, I think I lost myself again,*

Nia's son was 3 years old when he was suspended for what Nia referred to as "age appropriate behavior." In other words, Nia felt like her son's behavior and at times, his misbehavior, was what should be expected of a typical 3-year-old. However, according to Nia, when she asked the school on whether or not her son's behavior was age appropriate, they never gave a response. She was the second parent I interviewed for this study and the first to use the words "traumatic" and "traumatized" to describe her experience of having a child suspended from school. During the transcription of Nia's interview, hearing those words did something to me, as a listener. It immediately took me back to the first interview I had done just a few weeks prior. It also took me back to my own experience of having two sons suspended from school. In some sense, Nia, in recounting her story, gave me permission that also came with an ethical and moral obligation to go back and analyze my testimony and the testimony of the first parent



through a trauma lens. Early on, I began with historical trauma – “a collective complex trauma inflicted on a group of people who share a specific group identity or affiliation” characterized by “the legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events” (Evans-Campbell, 2008, p. 320). Historical trauma was very present in Nia’s testimony, particularly as she connected school suspension with the War on the Drugs, an era that resulted in poor Communities of Color being targeted by disparate drug policies. Additionally, while it is not mentioned in her song, Nia put the War on Drugs and school suspension in conversation with the Tuskegee Experiment – another historical trauma that Nix (2017) explained as:

The Tuskegee Experiment was a notorious medical research project involving hundreds of poor African-American men that took place from 1932 to 1972 in Macon County, Alabama. The men in the study had syphilis, a sexually transmitted infection, but didn’t know it. Instead they were told they had “bad blood” and given placebos, even after the disease became treatable with penicillin in the 1940s.

Like Nia, the parents in this study connected their experiences with other historical traumas in the Black community (e.g. slavery, segregation and mass incarceration). Because of these connections, I considered framing this study around historical trauma, but the historical trauma framing always felt incomplete; as if it were a part (perhaps an important or essential part) but not the whole. Then I revisited something Nia said, “I know the school-to-prison pipeline is framed as a youth issue, and it is. It is. But it impacts parents.” This coupled with parent testimony after parent testimony is ultimately what led me to the framing collective trauma – a framework that locates a people in history and establishes a baseline of trauma before a disaster occurs. Because of this, I was able to take up the concept of historical trauma while also being able to consider the ways in which this phenomenon, the disproportionality of school suspension, was or eventually might be considered a historical trauma of its own. Most importantly, collective trauma, in addition its historical implications, is all about relationships

and bonds with self and with others. Rather than using the word community, when Erikson (1976) coined the term collective trauma and its tenets, the author was intentional about his usage of the word *communality* because he said the term was more specific to examining the relationships and bonds that attach people together, which brought me back to Nia's desire for the framing of the school-to-prison pipeline to include parents.

Though parents, themselves, were not on the receiving end of the suspension, because of the sacred relationship between a parent and a child, in their interviews, they say or suggest that it felt like they were also being suspended. For Nia, at the time that her 3-year-old son was suspended, she was going through a divorce, working a full-time job, and going to school. Her son was suspended so many times that she was forced to drop out of school. She lost her job and she also lost sight of who she was as a parent. The process of her son being repeatedly suspended made her question her parenting, eventually letting go of that parenting approach and ultimately, she said she replaced it with spankings and unfamiliar phrases such as “stop making things hard for Mommy.”

Patrice shared a similar story of shifting her parenting style from playful and fun to strict and punitive. At the time of my interview with Patrice, her kids' father was incarcerated. Before scheduling our interview, she told him about the study, in which he felt compelled to reflect on his experiences in school. When he was in high school, his brother was murdered. Not long after, one of his best friends died of a heart attack during one of their basketball practices at the school. Rather than take time off to process his brother's and his friend's death, a process rarely afforded to Black youth, he went to school. According to what Patrice shared with me, her kids' father went to school in search of hope. However, by the 11th grade, he no longer saw school as a hopeful place and as she told me, “he said the only place that he felt wanted was the streets.” The children's father dropped out of high school in the 11th grade. Patrice carried the weight of his

trauma and the weight of her responsibility as a single mother doing her best to raise two children. In 2017, her youngest child, a son, was suspended at just 2 years old for taking off his clothes. Her daughter, who was repeatedly suspended up until the age of 5, was first suspended at just 3 years old. The verse below expands on Patrice's experience.

Patrice's Verse

*Took my parenting to from high to low,  
No more conversation, now it's just "because I said so,"  
They dad in prison, but they don't know,  
We love him, but he asked to see them like that, I said no,  
Thinking bout my son, prison is not an option, only college,  
That's why it messed me up when they sent them home, refused them knowledge,  
He's 2, she's just 3,  
They just wanna play, so the weight of it all is on me,  
Nights I used to spend reading are replaced with tears,  
What do you do when your dreams become your fears,  
Been running from prison, trying to push school,  
They see me pursuing a master's, my daughter in my cap and gown, saying, I'm gone do it too,  
But they said they broke the rules, and it broke me in two,  
But I better wipe these tears, lost or not, I got work to do,*

Hook

*I found myself and I lost myself again,  
What is this?  
This can't be happening,  
Is it a product of my bad parenting?*

*Help me find my way, I think I lost myself again,*

Patrice was pursuing a master's degree when I interviewed her. Education was very important to her. Even though she and her kids' father had a great relationship, she says she would never allow her children to visit their dad in prison because she did not want to normalize it. Instead, even though her children were young, she pushed education. Patrice had hope in education, just like her kids' father. However, that place of hope became a place of push out after her son was suspended once and her daughter suspended more times than she can remember. There was tension between how Patrice saw herself and her parenting and how the world (read school) saw her and her parenting. At times, the pain surfaced in the form of tears and long nights. Other times, the pain revealed itself in the stern and short responses that she gave her young children. Patrice internalized this tension and mostly dealt with the pain in private. Her perception of herself was wedged between what schools had indirectly said about her and the single story that society has always told about Black parents - that Black parents do not care, are absent, or are not good parents (Delpit 2006; Fields-Smith 2005; Finders and Lewis 1994; Reynolds 2010; Sankofa Waters 2016).

Every interview was difficult for me, but Trina's interview was especially heartbreaking because unlike most parents in this study, at the time of our interview her son was no longer a boy; he was a man. Her son was in his 30s when I interviewed her - more than two decades after her son was suspended. After one of her daughters learned about my story, she suggested that her mother reach out to me to share hers. The first thing Trina did was share a poem with me she had written four years before I interviewed - more than 20 years since the disaster of school suspension. The following verse blends our interview and the poem that she shared with me during our interview.

Trina's Verse

*An Apology to my Black Son,  
Forgive me, for what I've done,  
Or what I didn't do, to protect you at school,  
This has been lingering in my soul for many, many days,  
But I couldn't find the words, and I so say,  
I apologize, I didn't know what it would take,  
For this world as a parent, I was unprepared,  
They couldn't see your greatness, but I never spoke up,  
I just stared,  
It was violent, but I stayed silent,  
You were a king to me, but I let them treat you like a tyrant,  
And it ripped me up inside because I knew,  
Still pains me to this day, and I know it does for you,*

### Hook

*I found myself and I lost myself again,  
What is this?  
This can't be happening,  
Is it a product of my bad parenting?  
Help me find my way, I think I lost myself again,*

Both Patrice and Nia described their children as too young to fully understand. Their perspectives on their children's ability to comprehend the suspensions are reasonable and rationale. The suspensions of their children all took place between the ages of 2 and 5. Trina's son was 7 years old when he was first suspended, which is still incredibly young, but old enough that he was able to read, able to bathe himself, and able to remember more than a 2 year old.

Throughout our interview, it seemed clear to me that because she had lived through it and watched her son grow into adulthood that her loss of self also came with a level of guilt that other parents, including myself, had yet to live through. She admitted that she was not prepared when she got pregnant with her son. She and her family started out living in public housing. Still, Trina was determined to get her family out of poverty. That was her mindset back then. Years later, Trina was mostly concerned with healing. When I interviewed her, according to Trina, she was four years into her first step of healing in search of herself, which was an admission that what happened was traumatic for her, her son and her family.

This idea of temporality and a loss of self was interesting to me. When I interviewed Nia, seven years had passed since her son was suspended. The content of her interview flowed as a dialogue between who she was and who she was becoming. Nia was determined to find herself, to rise from the metaphorical ashes as she did when she was a kid, plagued by the War on the Drugs. Patrice was in the thick of it. Her son had recently been suspended and her daughter had also been suspended repeatedly during the year I interviewed her. Trina's loss of self was decades old. Despite variation between the time of interview and the date of suspensions, not much had changed. Schools still operated as both judge and jury. Perhaps, most troubling, beyond the stagnant school experiences, is that each of these parents had gone through and survived their own man-made disasters to get to where they were. Somehow, the experience of school suspension, in their families, had managed to set them back or as I tried to capture through song - they lost themselves again. Popular and research literature refer, again and again, to the theme of the loss of self, historically speaking, as what it has meant to be Black in America, whether it has been the perming of our hair to make it straight; or the need to discipline our children before the world does. Just when these parents thought they had it figured out, just

when I thought I had it figured out, it felt as if the “other world” i.e., the white world, was asking us the underlying question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” (Du Bois, 1903).

### Hook

*I found myself and I lost myself again,*

*What is this?*

*This can't be happening,*

*Is it a product of my bad parenting?*

*Help me find my way, I think I lost myself again,*

### *Loss of Communal*

One of the scars of collective trauma is loss of communality. According to Erikson (1976), loss of communality is about a loss of connection “with whom one shares bonds of intimacy and a feeling of mutual concern,” “even with those they see every day” (pp. 187, 215). Nine out of 14 parents shared testimonies of loss of communality. With the exception of one parent, Chris, this loss was rarely ever shared directly. Below, I introduce the testimonies of Chris, Renee and Brad. This song starts with Chris, a father of two sons, both of whom were suspended. At the time of our interview, not only had his 5-year-old son been suspended from school, Chris’ son had also been handcuffed by a police officer for attempting to run out of the school. His oldest son, who was 7 years old at the time of our interview and had an Individual Education Plan (IEP), had also been suspended.

Song Title: *By Myself*

Chris Verse 1

*I wasn't supposed to make it, made something out of nothing,*

*But then, here I am, I'm feeling nothing,*

*Not even gonna lie, this broke me down,  
Lost my youngest because of this school,  
Now I lost my oldest, too,  
I don't have a dad to call, I can't call nobody,  
Can you imagine the Bulls if they had Jordan without Scottie,  
Maybe I'm the problem, maybe it's me,  
Baby Mama calling, "Can I talk to my kids," she saying we'll see,*

Hook

*Stripped me of what I fought for,*

*Now it's just me,*

*All by myself,*

*I feel lonely,*

Chris Verse 2

*I'm thinking give me a break, I just got custody,  
My mom and I just got back good, now she fussing at me,  
I told you so, Baby Mama tripping, she  
said, gone give them kids back to me,  
What I tell you was gone happen? Exactly!  
Now the whole world mad at me,  
I feel like I let my boys down, I tried to fight, I hope they see,  
Not the man that I am, but the man I'm tryna be,  
They better versions of me,  
So, when the school called, you don't know what it did to me,  
I was working hard, trying to give them a fresh start,*



*Stable home, all the things I never had, I was playing my part,  
But after they Mom heard they were suspended, everything ended,  
Now I can only hope they remember the good times,  
Basketball, video games, lots of sunshine,  
Now it's all long days, more rain than shine,  
Just waiting for the next phone call from their mama to tell me they're fine,*

**Hook**

*Stripped me of what I fought for,  
Now it's just me,  
All by myself,  
I feel lonely,*

I met Chris through an initial contact with his girlfriend. His girlfriend and I had recently met, and she was aware of my story as well as my scholarship on school suspension. Chris, as was captured in Verse 1, was broken down by what was happening to his sons. He and his girlfriend lived together with her three children and his two sons. It was a new arrangement for the couple after the mother of Chris' children agreed to let his sons live with him. It was the first time in Chris' sons' lives - outside of spending summers together - that they had physically lived with Chris. His girlfriend was supportive - perhaps, the most supportive person of anyone in this study. Still, Chris said he "felt very alone."

His testimony was one story of loss of communality after another. He survived a very rough childhood. Just months before I met him, he was repairing a tumultuous relationship with his mother. Things had gotten so good that she was even helping him with his sons, which included picking them up from school almost every day. After his sons were suspended, Chris and his mother started placing blame on each other, as did Chris and the mother of his sons, who

eventually reneged on her decision and arranged for her sons to move back with her. According to Chris, the renegeing on the decision to let Chris be the effective custodial parent of his sons was a breaking point for Chris. He and the mother of his kids had gone through so much - married early, divorced, estranged - and were trying their best to co-parent. After their sons were suspended, they both went back to the toxicity that had previously consumed them and their relationship. School suspension had not only managed to push his sons out of the classroom but also out his life. At the time of our interview, he was doing his best to keep in touch with his kids, but he admitted that he only talked to them “every now and then.”

Parents experienced the loss of communality in very different ways. On the surface, parents’ testimonies did not all look as devastating as Chris’ loss of commonality – that is to say that none of the other parents reported having lost custody of their children, yet each testimony, though different, came with its own devastation. Brad processed his loss differently. Brad is a businessman who is married with three children. His youngest daughter, who was first suspended when she was 4 years old, was “a handful,” as he referred to her. “She’s smart though,” he added. The following verse offers a glimpse into Brad’s testimony.

#### Brad’s Verse

*Thought I made enough money to make it go away,  
But they call me, I play negotiator, try to convince them to let her stay,  
F It, I’m on my way,  
Pick her up, drop her off at home,  
I’mma be right back, I need some time of my own,  
Hiding at a card game because it’s all too much,  
“Go get her checked, you need to talk to such and such,”  
They don’t seem to understand why I’m hesitant,*

*If my daughter is in special ed, she'll never be able to president,  
And I love my wife, I think she's heaven sent,  
But lately this is all she wants to talk about, and I feel like it's not time well spent,  
So, I'm distant,  
Same routine,  
Pick her up, drop her off at home,  
Back in my car, I need some time alone,  
Ignore call, I command to Siri on my phone,*

**Hook**

*Stripped me of what I fought for,  
Now it's just me,  
All by myself,  
I feel lonely,*

In my interview with Brad, he was wrestling with the fact that money and access to the best schools could not prevent his child from being suspended from school, a common misconception that was disproved by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). In 2018, the GAO (2018) found that even after controlling for factors such as poverty and school type, Black students were still the most suspended students in the country.

Brad told me that he was normally a very public person, especially on social media outlets, who shared the highs and lows of life, but admitted that he did not publicly share that his daughter was suspended from preschool. In fact, he said that he only told a few family members and friends. When I asked him why, he struggled at first with a response and eventually told me that his wife and others close to him suggested that “something might be wrong” with his daughter. Brad refused to entertain their concerns out of a fear that a diagnosis would limit his

daughter from a world of opportunity or as he put it, “She’ll never be able to be president.” Brad’s fear is rooted in a misconception about disability and education - the idea that all students with disabilities are unable to live independent and professionally successful lives (Celletti, 2018).

His daughter was suspended multiple times and moved around from preschool to preschool, he said. He and his daughter remained close despite what he called a “stressful” situation. However, he and his wife grew apart. On nights that his daughter was suspended, rather than be home with his family, he gambled at poker houses. When his mother, someone he is very close to, asked about his daughter, he was vague about what was happening at home, and to his daughter. His strategy, based on the stories he told, was to pretend like none of it mattered and when he could no longer pretend, he isolated himself from his family.

Isolation did not appear to be an intentional behavior; it was a response, an effect of the shame that, in Brad’s case, was associated with having a child suspended from school. Brown (2012) who studied the difference between guilt and shame, concluded that “shame is a focus on self” and “guilt a focus on behavior.” The author noted that shame “washes over gender,” however, it is also organized by gender. For men, Brown (2012) contended, “shame is one: do not be perceived as weak.” Thus, rather than appear weak, Brad withdrew himself from the situation, which impaired his relationship with his wife and his mother.

#### Hook

*Stripped me of what I fought for,*

*Now it's just me,*

*All by myself,*

*I feel lonely,*

Renee reached out to me through social media. She was desperate when I met her. She asked me if she could pay for me to fly to her city to hear her story and the stories of other parents like her, parents of young Black boys who had been suspended from school. I used my own money to fly out to interview her. She was caring for a brother who was disabled, working a full-time job, volunteering in her community and trying to get a start-up business off the ground. She was known in her community as a Malcolm X or Ida B. Wells, in her own right. Her son was 3 years old when he was first suspended. It was a blow to her, especially to her sense of self - as she battled her sense of self, as an activist, a characterization that she felt was the perception of others in the community of her - and a mother with a son who had been labeled “bad.” Her loss of communality also appeared to be at the hand of shame, which for women, as Brown (2012) found, is not always noticeable. According to Brown, women typically continue fulfilling their duties and suffer in silence. According to Renee, she was like that, suffering internally even while continuing to work in and serve her community. On the inside, from the stories she told, she was lonely. She appeared to be slowly detaching herself from the people she saw every day.

#### Hook

*Stripped me of what I fought for,*

*Now it's just me,*

*All by myself,*

*I feel lonely,*

#### Renee's Verse

*Second year of preschool, last year was great,*

*Top of his class, my baby was straight,*

*Now they saying he's bad, right in his face,*

*Without ever explaining to me what took place,*

*Feel like the whole world watching, they wanna see me undone,  
Because they suspended and labeled my son,  
And even though it hurts inside, I won't let them know they won,  
People have been waiting for my downfall,  
Question that out of concern text and phone call,  
We went from a fight for us all,  
To me being ready to pack up and move in a U-Haul,*

Hook

*Stripped me of what I fought for,  
Now it's just me,  
All by myself,  
I feel lonely,*

According to Renee, it seemed that her network of relationships was changing as a result of her son's suspension. The news that her son was suspended was traveling throughout her community and she was not sure who to trust. She felt disconnected. She continued serving her community but shared, in the interview, that she had hopes of "moving to Georgia or Texas" to start over. Renee, Chris and Brad's testimony shed light on what nine of 14 parents have lived through. Each of these parents had experienced a loss - not by death but by the disaster of school suspension. They had been robbed of intimate relationships and kinship bonds - bonds that historically had been one of the only sources of support and protection that had gotten Black Americans through some of the worst of times (Berlin & Rowland, 1998).

Hook

*Stripped me of what I fought for,  
Now it's just me,*

*All by myself,  
I feel lonely,*

### *Resistance*

Collective trauma was birthed out of Erikson's (1976) field work in a tightly knit Appalachian community in Buffalo Creek, West Virginia after the community was unraveled by a flood. He was concerned with the personal and communal effects of a flood disaster. He went looking for scars and found scars of feelings of powerlessness, loss of self and loss of communality. Though he did not explicitly write about resistance as a trauma response, resistance was present - even if in the slightest form such as a refusal to give up. I heard that refusal to give up in the testimonies of every parent in this study. In the same breath of resilience as their ancestors, parents refused to give up even after they had been given reason.

Denham (2008) wrote about resistance as a trauma response and urged scholars to document alternative trauma responses to account for the variation in how people experience and respond to trauma. That is not to say that people, in this case parents, were not hurting and in pain. Many of the parents in this study, prior to sharing their testimonies with me, suffered in silence. Still, the telling of their stories would not be complete if I did not account for resistance as a response to the trauma they endured. Resistance, as implied and described by these parents, was not necessarily an active or deliberate effort. By definition, resistance is "the refusal to accept or comply with something; the attempt to prevent something by action or argument" (Oxford, 2020).

In this sense, using the latter part of the definition – "the attempt to prevent" despite lacking power and dealing with personal and communal loss, parents were still fighting to push their children out of the pipeline, even if they could not push themselves out.

Parents shared testimonies of resistance in one or more of the following four ways: (1) protecting the innocence of their children (2) organizing (3) to keep keeping on and (4) connecting their struggle to their ancestors as a source of hope. This section features one song titled, *If You're Black* and features a total of four verses, one verse for each of these acts of resistance.

The first verse below is about Lyric - the mother of a son who was suspended when he was 8 years old during one of the sickest times of Lyric's life. Lyric, who has an autoimmune disease, shared stories during the interview that embody two of the four themes that reflect the ways that parents seemed to engage in resistance - organizing and protecting the innocence of her child.

Song Title: *If You're Black*

Lyric Verse

*Even though I didn't put him out of school, I put him in a school that put him out,*

*Now what does that say about?*

*Me,*

*If you're Black it's a struggle, that's just reality,*

*But as a Mother, that's on me,*

*My job to protect his innocence,*

*So, in a sense,*

*I feel like it's on me to carry the weight,*

*After all, my baby was only 8,*

*So, when they suspended him, I told him it was a free day,*

*Never let him know, never let it show,*

*I didn't want that on his mind,*



*Never let him know, never let it show,  
It's up to me to make sure he's fine,*

Hook

*If You're Black it's a Struggle,  
Your Consciousness is Double  
Forced to Rise from the Rubble,  
If You're Black it's a Struggle,*

As Dennis-Benn (2016) wrote, “for black children, innocence is snatched away too soon, a brutal initiation into a frigid world.” Thus, Lyric’s act of resistance, to not reveal to her son that he was suspended, was her refusal to succumb to that initiation. “I didn’t want him to have a negative picture in his mind,” Lyric said after I asked her why she chose not to tell her son. “I didn’t want him to believe a label.” Her experience with her child, an experience that she said she would “never get over,” compelled Lyric to organize Black parents around issues in education, which also pushed Lyric, someone who dropped out of high school and got a general education degree (GED) at the age of 26, to pursue a PhD in Education. While other parents seemed to engage in resistance through other forms, Lyric, Nia, Porsha and Renee were the only four parents in this study whose act of resistance was to organize other parents. In light of the general similarity of their reported choice of resistance to effect change, through grassroots organizing, the verse below combines the stories of Lyric, Nia, Porsha and Renee to shed light on how these mothers resisted through grassroots organizing.

Hook

*If You're Black it's a Struggle,  
Your Consciousness is Double  
Forced to Rise from the Rubble,*

*If You're Black it's a Struggle,*  
Lyric, Nia, Porsha and Renee Verse  
*It's about our kids, Black kids collectively,*  
*Started with googling school suspension,*  
*It happened unexpectedly,*  
*Couldn't believe my eyes,*  
*Had me reading obsessively,*  
*Who knew our children were seen more aggressively,*  
*Teachers come with assumptions, how they see us perceptually,*  
*She getting a PhD, threw them off, they weren't expecting me,*  
*Won't back down, it's time to do this unapologetically,*  
*I got other parents and they expecting me,*  
*When you not just doing it for you,*  
*That's success to me,*

The first line of this verse, “It’s about Black kids collectively.” aims to point to one of the most compelling reasons why each of these parents chose to use organizing as a form of resistance. While Lyric is the parent who used the phrase “It’s about Black kids collectively”, Porsha, Renee and Nia, in their interviews, also shared a similar sentiment. Porsha said she was “fighting for Black lives.” Renee said she was doing it “for us” and Nia spoke at length about her work explicitly being about Black kids and parents. Additionally, parents talked about how books, online literature and other parents’ testimonies on the disproportionality of school suspension was critical to their decision to organize other parents. Finally, the line “She getting a PhD, threw them off, they weren’t expecting me” is a play on stories that Lyric and Porsha shared. Lyric noted that now in a PhD program, when speaking with educators, she tried to lead

with information hoping that the pursuit of a doctoral degree would make educators respect her. Similarly, Porsha used the approach, laying claim to the short-circuit preconceived notions that the educators may have had about her. Porsha is the mother of three children, a daughter and two sons, one of whom despite an autism diagnosis was suspended repeatedly in elementary school. Porsha said she “tried to make sure that [her] education level and all of that is known in some way, shape, or form.” Porsha and Lyric Porsha pinpoint a frequent finding in the research literature (McClain, 2019; Morgan, 2004; Moynihan, 1965) – Black women being positioned as uneducated (read uneducable) and lacking civility. Here, despite holding two master’s degrees, Porsha directly sees herself as situated within this racialized narrative, just as Tiffany did in the section on feelings of powerlessness. The powerful narrative, in the United States of the Black mother as single, uneducated, and poor, although this was not Porsha’s profile, should not have equated to a negative schooling experience for her son, but we know that in many ways it does (African American Policy Forum, 2016; Moynihan, 1965).

Organizing as an act of resistance is a common trauma response for Black mothers and is often celebrated. While it is easy to celebrate Black mothers for organizing in response to a manmade disaster such as the disproportionate suspension of Black children or police brutality, as Tamir Rice’s mother<sup>3</sup>, Samaria Rice, reminds us, “I never got a chance to grieve...because I had to get active right away” (Townsend, 2019). In other words, we have given Black mothers no other choice but to get on the front lines to demand justice, which has consequently robbed them of the chance to grieve, to feel and to process.

Less commonly celebrated, but more common in this study were parents who were just trying to make it, which for some meant waking up every day in spite of the trauma and giving

<sup>3</sup> In 2014, Tamir Rice, who was just 12 years old, was shot and killed by a police officer in Cleveland, Ohio.

themselves a few minutes to cry at the end of a long day. This will to keep on keeping on was an act of resistance for Grandma Tessa, Brad, Constance, Derrick, Chris, Patrice, Diane, Trina, Renee and Tiffany. The verse below is an interweaving between the stories of Constance and Grandma Tessa but represents all the parents who pushed through as an act of resistance.

Verse 2

*Tried everything, went to the school board, ACLU, NAACP*

*It was a struggle, they never listened to me,*

*I just had to keep on going,*

*Even though I knew they were wrong,*

*Never wanted him to grow up and think I didn't try,*

*But after you've done all you can,*

*You gotta keep moving, no time to wonder why,*

*Before you know it, times passes you by,*

*And you never forget, I still hurt,*

*It's still on my mind,*

*Get used to moving on like you're fine,*

*And hope that this wound heals in time,*

Hook

*If You're Black it's a Struggle,*

*Your Consciousness is Double*

*Forced to Rise from the Rubble,*

*If You're Black it's a Struggle,*

Grandma Tessa fought so hard for her grandson. By the time I met her, her grandson was in 5th grade. Grandma Tessa recalled that his first suspension was in 2nd grade, a year that she

remembered as “a struggle.” “Every day I was picking him up,” she said. Grandma Tessa won custody of her grandson and his three siblings when her grandson was just 3 years old. At a young age, earlier than when he was in 2nd grade, Grandma Tessa said her grandson was diagnosed with four disabilities, including Tourette’s. Her grandson was suspended, expelled and eventually sent to a behavioral school. She was struggling to find support in her community. During our interview, I felt that I could hear the stress in her voice. I felt that I could hear the toll that all had taken on her. She sounded desperate; desperate to share her story; desperate to be heard and have anyone listen. She never found support in her community, and it seemed apparent that the lack of community support hurt her, but she said she had to keep on going for her family. Constance also felt that she had to keep pushing for her family, which included two other sons - both of whom had not been suspended. In her interview, she made it clear that despite her feelings, her kids needed her to be strong and to move forward. She reported that she was doing the best she could. Nia and Porsha kept pushing forward too, but they explicitly connected their strength to that of their ancestors. The verse below captures some of what they both shared.

Nia and Porsha’s Verse

*In those moments of despair, I think about the fact that we still here,*

*Fannie Lou Hammer, Ida B. Wells,*

*Tried to enslave us, now they lock us up in jails,*

*Our sons are Pinocchio, they wanna be real boys,*

*We fight back, they say we’re loud, we make too much noise,*

*And it’s not just our Black boys,*

*But Still I rise, still we rise,*

*And when we cry, our ancestors are wiping up our eyes,*

*Telling us to fight, don't give in,  
And that's what keeps me going.*

### **Hook**

*If You're Black it's a Struggle,  
Your Consciousness is Double  
Forced to Rise from the Rubble,  
If You're Black it's a Struggle,*

Porsha's organizing started long before she was a parent. Her parents, originally from the West Coast, were heavily involved with the Black Panther Party. Organizing and activism were ingrained in her and those two things came with learning about the history of Black people, pre-slavery. By contrast, Nia, learned how to organize along the way through books - essentially building the boat while sailing it. Their interview comments indicated that they both believed that it was the remembering of their ancestors that not only pushed them through but kept them fighting, not only for themselves, for other Black families, collectively, a sentiment rooted in Black motherhood (Hill Collins, 1987; McClain, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

In the latter part of Busta Rhymes' quote that is featured earlier in this chapter, the rapper argued that in addition to hip hop providing a platform to expose truths and offer information, hip hop serves as a platform for escape. Part of my decision to employ hip hop as a presentation method was influenced by the ability of hip-hop music to be an escape for parents in this study. Here, escape refers to a moment or opportunity for relief. I wanted parents to be able to see and hear their stories come to life in a way that would balance truth and escape, a relief of sorts that is often found in hip hop music. Through hip hop music, Black communities in the United States

and throughout the African Diaspora have been able to share and listen to each other's pain and trauma while also getting lost in the rhythm. In my interviews with parents, my approach was to let them dictate the pace and structure of the interview with the exception of my grand tour question: "Tell me about the time or times your child was suspended from school." Similarly, rather than focus on the number of bars for each verse, I sought to allow parents' stories to dictate the structure and number of bars that I shared. I did my best to capture the essence of each of these parents while also realizing that my words, even in song, could never fully capture or account the totality of their experiences.

My aim, in this chapter, was to have their stories and the songs serve as a glimpse, a piece of a whole. The findings in this inquiry, that explored the research question, "How do Black parents of a young child suspended from school describe their experiences of having a child suspended from school?", offer very strong evidence that parents described their experiences as a form of collective trauma. Though none of them used the words "collective trauma" (Erikson, 1976), they shared stories of feelings of powerlessness, loss of self and loss of communality that were all linked to the disaster of school suspension. In place of the words "collective trauma", parents used words such as "nothing," "stressed" and "traumatized;" phrases like "I feel lonely," and told stories of feeling like suspension and other punitive forms of discipline were similar to prison sentences. As research has made it clear, school suspension is associated with a prison sentence. However, as these parents have also made clear, prison, then, is not only a physical holding space but a confinement of the psyche even when the body is physically free, not only for a child who is pushed through the school-to-prison pipeline but also for parents.

## **Track 5: Discussion and Implications**

Through the analytic lens of collective trauma, I described the personal testimonies of Black parents of young children who were suspended from school. The focus of the testimonies included (1) feelings of powerlessness, (2) loss of self, (3) loss of communality, and (2) resistance. To provide respect and honor to the voices of these parents, and their trauma, I drew on my extensive knowledge of hip hop as a genre, and as a powerful tool for communicating the stories of these parents and their families. In this final chapter, I discuss what I regard as the two important contributions, that this work offers to research, to policy, and to practice, the influence my methodological lens had on this study, with a particular focus on what my sampling method and the use of collective trauma as an analytic lens allowed us, the readers, to see that we could not see before, and the identification of suspension-related trauma in the lives of Black parents. Additionally, I discuss how these findings extend the literature on school suspension, Black families and early childhood education. Then, I share important takeaways and implications for practitioners and policymakers that flow from these findings. I end the chapter with questions for future research.

### **Discussion**

I conducted a descriptive qualitative inquiry that consisted of individual interviews with a cross-country sample of 14 Black parents of children who were suspended from school between the ages of 2 years old and 9 years old. The decision to focus on the testimonies of Black parents as my unit of analysis unfolded in two parts: It began with the public sharing of my own experience of having young children suspended from school, which then resulted in Black parents coming forward to share their own stories of having a child suspended from school. I



term this two-part process as *altar call* – following the historical practice in Black churches throughout the United States of creating space for church members and visitors alike to come to the altar to offer their testimonies, testimonies which can allow them to share their pain, and, perhaps also help another person through the pain that person may have experienced. Perhaps, similar to the findings of McGuire (2016), the altar call approach allowed for a “structured sincerity,” which McGuire describes as, “experiences that were in many ways overdetermined by environment and agents, none of it felt forced, and as such allowed for experiences of depth, meaning, and agency...” (McGuire, 2016). While McGuire is describing his experience as a minister in the Black church and the emergence of his spiritual understandings, he points to the value of connecting by a means of telling his story, to and with others. As it tends to happen in church where one person’s sharing encourages another person to come forward, I allowed the cumulative effect of my public sharing to guide this study.

Employing this sampling technique gave me access to Black parents, a group that has been understudied, arguably neglected, and have been talked about more than they have been talked to or with. Perhaps, more importantly than giving me, the researcher, access, this particular sampling method gave parents, participants, access to research - the choice to tell their stories and to have those stories collected, analyzed and re-shared and documented. This shift in access - from being asked to tell a story to coming forward because you have a story to tell - is what allowed for the level of vulnerability that is present in each of these parents’ testimonies. Parents were not recruited; they were recruiters with stories to bear. Thus, as a researcher, I was less interested in asking specific questions and more interested in listening to their stories as their trauma unfolded. During the interviews, parents did not spend a lot of time talking about loss of classroom instruction or loss of time at work, which is what I initially expected given the novelty of our relationship. Instead, they shared personal stories - intimate stories about the impact of

school suspension on their psyche, something that I found was missing from the literature on school suspension. Furthermore, this sampling method gave parents agency and power in a world with a long history of denying agency to participants, especially participants of color (Ulysse, 2002). I argue that this sampling method lends itself to scholars interested in humanizing approaches to research (Paris, 2011; Paris & Winn, 2013). The approach intentionally seeks to break down the barriers between the researcher and researched by leading with self-examination and self-sharing, thus also situating the researcher as a research participant, in part (Powell & Coles, 2020).

### **Collective Trauma in Educational Research**

Because parents came bearing stories to tell, in the 60 to 90 minutes that I spent with each of them, they delved right in. Many of them were sharing their stories for the first time. As a researcher charged with making private sufferings public, I challenged myself to find an analytic framework that would facilitate sense making and understanding based on these parents' testimonies rather than out of convenience. Collective trauma, as an analytic framework, provided a collective analytic lens to a problem that, to date, had been under-examined, and when studied, was considered primarily through the lens of the individual, suspended, child. Furthermore, with a study of the likely presence of collective trauma came an analytic obligation to look for scars - damage done to people's psyches and to their communal relationships.

An examination of collective trauma also allowed me to provide evidence that I hope will encourage schools, school systems and policymakers to look at the disasters they have wrought in Black families and communities throughout the United States. Additionally, I hope that this study contributes to scholarship on trauma in education, which has typically only put school suspension and trauma in the same conversation when scholars have linked a child's inability to cope with psychological or physical trauma to reasons for "bad" behavior (Darensbourg, et. al,

2010; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006; Simkins, et. al, 2004). This prior work has been important in helping us understand the complexities of school suspension, however; it has failed to account for the racial and racializing experiences of discipline in schools as well as the fact that schools, themselves, are sites of trauma. Furthermore, trauma in educational research has unintentionally reified narratives of schools as saviors, and students and families, especially Black students and families and other people of color, as a people in need of saving from the trauma they have experienced elsewhere in their lives. In this work, I have offered collective trauma into the conversation to assert schools, too, can be, and in the testimonies represented in this case, are sites of disaster and sites of trauma. In doing so, my hope is that this study allows us, as a society, to think more deeply about how Black families grapple with school suspension to better understand how that grappling “involves identifying the ‘nature of the pain, the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility’” (Eyerman, 2001, pp. 3).

### **School Suspension and Black Families**

School suspension as a standard practice can be traced back to desegregation and white teachers’ concerns about educating other people’s children (Bickel, 1981). Though rarely documented, early into our nation’s experiment with desegregation, Black parents and students were vocal about school suspension disparities (Fairclough, 2007), however; as a nation, while we were willing to address the concerns of white teachers, we refused to address the concerns of Black families, which has consequently contributed to Black students being the most suspended students in the country (Gregory et. al, 2010; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2002; Noguera, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2016; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Most, if not all, research on school suspension disproportionality and the consequences of this disproportionality has been framed around the school-to-prison pipeline - a framing backed by statistics that suggest the more often a child is suspended from school, the more likely that child

is to be incarcerated (Wald & Losen, 2003; U.S. Department of Education and Health & Human Services, 2014).

Compelled by early conversations with Black parents, in this study, I sought to extend the literature on school suspension to go beyond this youth-focused, individual framing to consider the impact of school suspension on a child's kinship circle, in this case a child's parents. In doing so, this study named and described the reverberation of trauma in the lives of these Black families as a result of school suspension - what we now know as collective trauma.

### **Suspension in Early Childhood Education**

My decision to focus on early childhood education was twofold: (1) research on school suspension in early childhood education, especially in early care and preschool, is fairly new and thus understudied, and (2) "intricate bonding and attachment experiences" between children and their adult caregivers are "one of the most important elements of early childhood development" (Office of Head Start, 2020). In 2014, for the first time, the U.S. Department of Education released data revealing school suspension disparities start in preschool. Because the youngest child in this study was 2 years old, this study adds to the relatively small body of research on school suspension in early childhood education by highlighting evidence that school suspension has an earlier starting point than preschool. This finding warrants further exploration into early care and school suspension, a data set that currently does not exist.

Additionally, while research has been clear on the significance of bonds between children and their parents, attention has rarely, if at all, been paid to the ways in which the negative schooling experiences of young children potentially damage and detach those bonds. In this study, I found that parents' identities were attached to their children's (Schachter & Ventura, 2008). For the parents in this study, their world, and world view, was being shaped by the negative schooling experiences of their children. Their identities were being co-constructed

(Schachter & Ventura, 2008) and as a result of the suspension of their children, many of these parents felt they had lost themselves. The negative schooling experiences of their children seemed to be forcing parents to withdraw and depart from connections and relationships that had meant so much to them. Parents were embarrassed. Ashamed, even. Based on these findings, I argue that we must think more deeply about what this reframing of the self, as a parent, means for families. I suggest that we need research that does not decontextualize children from their families, especially in early childhood education. In this particular context, I suggest that we, as researchers, continue to explore if, how and to what extent racial inequalities in schools make their way into a child's family life.

### **Implications**

For decades, and as recently as 2014, including most recently after following the federal release of preschool suspension data, scholars have attributed school suspension disparities to teacher implicit bias (Gilliam, et al, 2016; Morris, 2016). Though the data on suspension disparities for upper grade children has been more widely documented, and arguably fairly well known in the research, practice, policy and popular literature, we, as a nation, were appalled at the idea of suspensions happening in preschool (Malik, 2017; Turner, 2016), which has led to calls across the country to ban suspension and other exclusionary forms of discipline in preschool and throughout early childhood education (Duffy, 2014; Mader, 2019; Phaneuf, 2019; Zelinski, 2019). And while I agree, banning school suspension as both a policy and a practice was an appropriate policy-level response, I want to caution both policymakers and practitioners on settling on a single solution. Improvement scientists (Bryk, Gomez, LaMahiu, and Grunow, 2015) point to the tendency of humans, in their personal and professional lives, to engage in “solutionitis” – the rapid focus on one sure-thing solution before the problem is fully understood. Put plainly, our solutions shed light on how we see and understand a problem, which in this case

means that we believe school suspension in and of itself to be the problem. However, in this study, it became evident that suspensions were part of a larger problem, a problem so large that simply banning suspension will not fix.

Restorative justice, another policy level decision, often designed as an in-school approach to address challenging and disruptive behavior (Hopkins, 2002), while less common at a national level and more common in states like California, if done well, may also be part of a solution but should not be seen as the only solution. Unintentionally, because of its underlying assumption that bad behavior is at the root of every suspension (Center for Justice & Reconciliation 2020), this approach reifies notions of schools as saviors merely in need of new approaches to deal with unruly, trauma-filled children. Again, school suspension disparities are not just about bad behavior. Restorative justice, then, is neither currently designed for, nor has there been literature to suggest that for parents like Nia – the mother whose 3-year-old was suspended from what she considered to be “age-appropriate behavior,” a useful response. It offers no comfort for Patrice whose son’s teacher perceived a 2-year-old taking off his clothes as bad and worthy of suspension. The problem of school suspension is and has always been about school – its purpose and who it was designed to serve or not serve. School suspension disparities, then, only serve to remind us, as a society, of the foregrounding of schools, arguably, at the expense of children, and the families who entrust their children to schools. These disparities are just another link in a chain of bondage for Black Americans, once forced into a foreign place and now forced to send their children to schools that never intended to serve them.

From this study, I offer a few questions for future research that also inform policy and practice. First, the majority of parents in this study expressed stories of feelings of powerlessness. Their feelings were not merely about having a child suspended but also about not being able to appeal or challenge the punitive decisions made. Parents experienced schools as

both judge and jury. Continuing with the metaphor, when considering mechanisms for providing parents with opportunities for an appeal, or more access to decision-making processes, particularly with respect to disciplinary decisions, in schools, how do we give parents voice in these processes? How do schools make good on their promises that parents are partners? How do schools share and concede power?

Additionally, once the decision has been rendered, and children have been suspended, one of the most compelling and heartbreaking findings in this study was the post-traumatic effects that still exist many years after a child has been suspended from school. Trina's story – whose son was suspended more than 25 years ago – reminds us of that. How do we address past harm? If we intervene early, does it lessen impact overtime? In other words, knowing that families have been harmed, how are we, researchers and storytellers, tasked with documenting and telling these stories. Furthermore, how are policymakers and practitioners using their positions to repair harm and to repair that harm as soon as possible?

As we grapple with these questions, I want to remind us that we must start with the concept of power, and I believe like Adichie (2009), power is in the stories we tell – “how they are told; who tells them; when they are told; and how many stories are told.” In this sense, this dissertation is an archive of wrongdoing because of its potential to disrupt power as well as serving as documentation for “society to keep a record of wrong so as to not repeat history” (Bell & Perkins, 2020, p. 2)

Finally, if we believe schools are indeed spaces of becoming, as educators and researchers, we have a moral and ethical obligation to consider the ways in which school suspension disparities are both trauma and reproductions of trauma at both the individual and collective levels. It is by exploring the problem through those directly impacted that we move closer to defining the problem correctly, which moves us closer to the solution. Moreover,

borrowing from Erikson (1976), we must look for scars. In this dissertation, I focused on school suspension. However, I believe there are other types of policies and practices that can engender collective trauma depending on a school's response and handling of a situation or a lack thereof (i.e. grade retention, failing report card, diagnosis of a disability, etc.).

Collective trauma as a framework helps us uncover those scars while also reminding us that “preservation (or restoration) of communal forms of life must become a lasting concern, not only for those charged with healing the wounds of acute disaster but for those [policymakers and school practitioners] charged with planning a truly human future” (Erikson, 1976, p. 259).

As a parent, you never really know if you are doing a good job until your child leaves and is in the care of someone else. Those interactions of our children away from us become the measuring stick. Most often, schools are the first place where those interactions happen. In other words, schools decide who the good and bad kids are; who the good and bad parents are. And as parents, we hope that the schools we have entrusted, whether cynically or naively, will care for and educate our children. Furthermore, even after that trust has been broken, for most parents, this is their only option. In educational research, policy and practice, we have left Black families to deal with this on their own; meaning we have left them to deal the trauma of their only option failing them and their child. They continue to show up, whether it be dropping their child off at school or finding time to participate in an afterschool function. We call them resilient. We celebrate their resiliency as if survival is all they deserve. Put plainly, in the words of Morgan (2019), who used shoes as a metaphor for resilience, “I’m in shoes right now that look amazing, but baby my feet hurt.” In other words, there is a price to pay for resilience. The price is trauma; thus resilience – “a byproduct of trauma” (Morgan, 2019) – is about surviving trauma. But as Love (2019) wrote, Black people “want to do more than survive.” In this study, it was parents’



fight for more than survival that kept them resisting, even if resisting was refusing to tell their young child he was suspended to preserve his innocence.

The real question for policymakers, practitioners and society at large becomes how long will we be okay with merely survival? Banning suspensions and implementing restorative justice are steps in the right direction, but if we want to make it to our destination of racial equity, of justice, of schools becoming what we imagine them to be, of what our ancestors imagined them to be, then we must change the very fabric of what schooling in the United States is and has always been.

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