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Blackness at the Center
An Antidote to Anti-CRT Rhetoric for Early and Elementary Literacy Classrooms

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Abstract

The contemporary moment has been marred with attacks on diverse children's literature and critical and antiracist pedagogy. The increasing numbers of banned books and curricular materials are aimed at diluting and silencing discussions of difference in classrooms. Moreover, race and racism continue to be "bad words" to some early childhood and elementary educators. As three teacher educators committed to justice-centered pedagogy, we reject the omnipresent whiteness that invades early childhood and elementary education and instead seek to shift the gaze to Blackness. Using the ghost pipe plant as a conceptual metaphor, this article will outline practical, instructional strategies and methods for educators who seek to challenge the persistent and overwhelming anti-CRT discourse and censoring by amplifying the stories, lifeworlds, and futures of Black children, families, and communities. We distill how educators can operate from a place of race consciousness to move beyond fear and colorblindness toward actualizing liberatory teaching and learning for Black children through critical engagements with Black children's literature.

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Introduction

The current sociopolitical moment is filled with political extremism and narrowing, myopic perspectives and policies that negatively impact the increasing diversity of our world. Education, in particular, has become a precarious field in which to work and operate in the U.S.; the climate is characterized by proliferating book bans of diverse literature, teacher firings for teaching marginalized histories, and presumed teachings and indoctrination of Critical Race Theory (CRT), and numerous pieces of legislation being introduced to hamper racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender & sexuality justice efforts in schools (Lopez et al., 2021; Pen America, 2023). This contention and anti-CRT rhetoric has brought about confusion concerning what can be taught and what is prohibited, ultimately distracting many educators from cultivating liberating learning spaces for young children (Miller et al., 2023; Cohen, 2022).

States have regulated the texts, histories, and instructional strategies valuable in early childhood and elementary classrooms. Whether the laws and bans are real or perceived, explicit or implicit (e.g., Virginia v. New York), teachers are limiting critical and antiracist pedagogy (Jayakumar & Kohli, 2023). Instruction is doubly censored by educators' fear of reprisal or censure, (un)intentionally restricting the scope of the histories and experiences they bring to classroom instruction. The limitations include educators' cultural and historical knowledge(s) of Black communities' histories (Brown & Brown, 2015; King, 2020), which act as inhibitors of possibility for students, especially those of Color and with other marginalized identities.

Teachers–many of them white–are using fear, discomfort, and unpreparedness as excuses or ways out of discussing race and racism in schools, rooted in a desire to "protect" their children and students from hard or "inappropriate" conversations (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Sachdeva & Adair, 2019). Children's emotional intelligence is being challenged and whether they have the capacity to handle or if they will feel guilty about learning "controversial" topics is being questioned. Yet, the emotional intelligence of the adults, white and non-white alike, limits students' opportunities to learn truthful histories, grapple with the inequity of the contemporary moment, and explore diverse narratives of joy, freedom, and beauty. We, as educators, must interrupt the cycle of violence and preservation of whiteness stemming from control and extraction in the ecosystems of early childhood classrooms.

Education is a field that "is not lacking in scholarship and literature that scientifically demonstrates the humanity of children of Color, but their suffering continues because their humanity is questioned and denied by the very people and policies charged with educating and protecting them" (Love & Muhammad, 2020, p. 695). When discussions of racism and injustice are eschewed, Black children, who bear a considerable amount of the brunt, are met with fewer opportunities to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and instruction of their classrooms (Sims Bishop, 1990; Toliver, 2021). Despite the efforts to suppress and silence the lived experiences of children and communities of Color, early childhood and elementary classrooms are full of Black brilliance, bursting with excitement and untapped possibility (James, 2023). Like the children we teach, there is a world full of books created for and by people who see value in themselves and their histories (Johnson & Turner, 2023). Teachers must provide and engage with diverse books so that what is being read and discussed in early classrooms amplifies the narratives of those most underserved in schools.

We, three teacher educators located in various regions of the U.S., are thinking critically about how educators can name the insidiousness of whiteness and its effects on Black children's

opportunities to learn. As such, in this article, we ask: *In light of the contemporary moment, how can ECE educators eschew race-evasive ideologies and decenter whiteness in their classrooms and honor and amplify Black life, Black children, and Black communities in their pedagogy and practices?* Using the parasitic ghost pipe plant as a conceptual metaphor(s), we aim to shift from the white gaze that overwhelmingly operates in early childhood classrooms to a focus on the intellectual well-being and potential of Black children (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Porcher & Bertrand, 2023). To this end, we discuss the instructional possibilities created when books and liberatory narratives are built for and by Black people and discuss how they can be used to support early childhood and elementary educators, particularly in the oppressive conditions of the present climate. We refuse to silence or dilute discussions of race in classrooms, acknowledging children as capable, willing, and prepared to engage in conversations about their own and other's identities and to interrupt racial injustices both in and outside of their classroom environments. We begin this piece by situating ourselves in this work through our positionalities.

Who We Are

We come to this work as teacher educators who teach and train majority white students in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). As former early childhood and elementary classroom teachers, our researcher identities and pedagogical approaches are informed by the profound belief in Black children's humanity and genius (Muhammad, 2020). We strive to honor the stories, lives, and beauty of Black children, their families, and communities. We are intentional in naming and upending white supremacy in our research and higher education pedagogy.

Wintre: I am an African American woman raising two Black children in the southern U.S. I am propelled by a fundamental belief in the expansive creativity, ingenuity, and complexity of Black children's being. Currently, I am a professor in a state that has seen the implementation of ban books in several counties, the state government's attempt to operate a (now defunct) Critical Race theory hotline and rewrite history through K-12 learning standards, aiming to combat the extremist, conservative political discourse by engaging in critical, race-conscious pedagogy in her teaching and research. Fueled by the desire to actualize educational justice, I view books and literature facilitation as a powerful intervention against upholding whiteness in K-12 classrooms and schools.

Dawnavyn: I am a an African American woman born and raised in a large Midwest city. My work centers the curriculum development and instruction of Black histories in early childhood and elementary classrooms. As a former kindergarten teacher, I created space for students to engage in what some would consider difficult conversations, and centered Black histories in the curriculum, and works with other elementary educators to support them in their teaching of Black history. I know the power of picture books for teaching and holding space for conversations centering race and Black history.

Brianne: I am a white woman raised kind but colorblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2022) in a large midwestern city. As an assistant professor of teacher education, I work to unearth my own and others' ingrained biases. I lean into Black histories and students' experiences as methods of restorying and restoring liberatory classroom communities. My instruction centers on the transformative power Black history picture books hold for educators and students of any background. My research focuses on Black histories, critical literacies, and educators' critical consciousness toward establishing more inclusive, socially just, and anti-oppressive classrooms.

Together, we align ourselves with the struggles for educational equity and the fight against suppression and erasure across the U.S. We name the structures that are at work that have perpetuated the status quo in education, limited Black children's opportunity to be their whole selves in schools, and maintained a culture of whiteness in U.S. schools through institutional racism. The following section examines research literature on three areas: 1) anti-Blackness in early education, 2) pro-Black approaches, and 3) work that frames classrooms as ecosystems.

Literature Review

Anti-Blackness in Early Elementary Classrooms

Numerous education scholars have theorized about anti-Blackness (e.g., Dancy et al., 2018; Dumas, 2014; Jenkins, 2014). Coles (2019) defines it as

> the legacy of U.S. chattel and plantation style slavery, which represents the human race's structurally embedded degradation of Black people and communities through imagining Blackness as inherently negative, needing to be policed and/or neutralized, and as outside the realms of humanity (p. 2).

As a result of the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in schools, young Black children are rendered unintelligent and uneducable (Dumas & ross, 2016). Early and elementary classrooms in the U.S. continue to be characterized by anti-Black racism and operate through anti-Black logic (Caldera, 2020; Dumas & ross, 2016). Overwhelmingly, teachers are white women, while students come from increasingly diverse backgrounds (NCES, 2020), with Black children being among those who are highly surveilled, over-disciplined, and underserved academically (Bryan, 2020; Crenshaw et al., 2015).

Moreover, anti-Black racism in early and elementary classrooms is manifested in numerous ways, including and especially through curriculum and pedagogy (Boutte & Bryan, 2019). Black children often endure educational contexts that do not see and affirm their humanity and are faced with curriculum and instruction that do not honor their literacies, languages, and communities. Curriculum and instruction that promotes white supremacy, ignores Black excellence, and distorts how Black people are perceived displays anti-Blackness and causes curricular violence (Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020).

This article is informed by work that has examined anti-Blackness in all levels of U.S. schooling, as we see it as a defining feature of how Black children's potential, worth, and intelligence are interpreted and the ways their future selves are limited in the imagination of many educators. Furthermore, we see children's literature as a primary lever in challenging anti-Blackness in early and elementary classrooms, refusing and resisting deficit ideologies about Black people and their humanity, and combating white dominance in curricula and pedagogy.

Pro-Black Early Literacy Classroom Contexts

Children's–especially Black children's–lived experiences are often ignored when their early and elementary teachers assume they do not recognize race, understand racism, or that history is not essential to engage with (Wild, 2022; Falkner, 2022). Yet research has demonstrated that Black children are keenly aware of the world in which they live and that schools need to resist whiteness and curricular erasure of Black people (Johnson, 2022; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022).

When teachers become learners of Black people, history, and culture and engage in pro-Black teaching, they can deepen their understanding of Blackness as well as challenge school policies and practices that harm Black students (Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020; Williams, 2022). Prioritizing pro-Black pedagogies, or those that employ "an unapologetic, positive, proactive, perspective regarding Blackness and Black people" (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022, p. 323-324), creates classroom spaces that affirm and acknowledge Black children, their culture, and their lived experiences as valid, as vibrant, and as fully human. Pro-Blackness quells curricular violence (Boutte & Bryan, 2019; Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020) and can be a tool for intellectual, socioemotional, and racial empowerment (Braden, et al. 2022; Williams, 2022).

As educators foster pro-Blackness in early childhood spaces across content areas, literacy is one powerful avenue to deepen historical thinking, build knowledge of the contributions of past and present, and expose Black children to literature that offers expansive narratives of Black life and culture (James, 2023). As a result, Black children can experience joy when learning about the contributions, resistance, resilience, community, and histories of their people (Dunn & Love, 2020; Williams, 2022). This joy facilitates well-being in schools (Williams, 2021). This article builds upon existing literature about pro-Black pedagogies and possibilities in schools and early childhood and elementary classrooms; we urge educators to ask themselves how they can shift the narrative and discourses in their classrooms and construct classrooms that take up pro-Blackness and advance emancipatory pedagogies (Duncan, 2020).

Early Childhood Educational Ecosystems

Classrooms, like nature, function as ecosystems. An ecosystem relies on interconnected networks of living and nonliving things, working together to gain sustenance from "the social, intellectual, and emotional exchange" (Buckelew & Fishman, 2010, p. xvi). The health of such a learning *ecology* (Barron, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) relies on the interactions between complex contexts, including the physical space, individuals within it, their materials, and the instructional methods employed. Interactions within these ecosystems, whether symbiotic (mutually beneficial) or parasitic (stealing or causing harm), alter the classroom ecosystem and determine what thrives within. Parasitic relationships are demonstrated in early and elementary classrooms that are consumed by anti-Blackness, replicating the ways "education can be a site of hyper-surveillance, dehumanization, and criminalization of Black children" (Nxumalo, 2021). However, teachers *can and do* facilitate classroom ecologies that are powerful sites of affective, complex, and relational instruction that prioritizes Black presence and is attuned to the more than human storying of place (Nxumalo, 2021). The difference is in the classroom educator's orientation and development, pedagogical practices, and commitment to using pro-Black instructional materials.

Exploring early childhood classrooms centering Black life in Canada, Nxumalo and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2023) documented the detrimental impacts of polite pedagogues that praised openness and choice only to exert control and then reveal deficit ideas about Black students. When this type of ecosystem is not disrupted, early childhood educators replicate problematic instruction they received–or that which they were trained to implement– instruction predicated on the success of white supremacy (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2007; Woodson, 1933; Yacovone, 2022). Such parasitic instructional practices and curricula uphold Eurocentric values, placing the focus on the educator as the primary purveyor of knowledge while demeaning the lived experiences of Black children in the classroom.

To counter these acts of violence, Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw (2023) abandon both colonial and individualist lenses "to think alongside Black children-in-relation with the more-than-human world" (2023, p. 193). The authors center Black aliveness (Quashie, 2021), the importance of place (both in and outside the classroom), storytelling, and more than human possibilities as methods of restoring and reframing positive classroom ecologies in the early childhood classroom (Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2023; Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017; Taylor & Giugni, 2012).

While the bulk of research that conceptualizes ecosystems in education focuses on the harmful impacts of the environmental contexts that Black children are subjected to living and learning in, this article seeks to build on the conceptualization of ecosystems as a network that can center on Black child(ren) thriving in education and broader society. Black children deserve educational ecosystems that operate not from scarcity and avoidance of race(ism) or deficit views of students and their communities but rather from the robustness of their culture and a commitment to cultivating perspectives of Black livingness (Griffin & Turner, 2021). Below, we introduce the ghost pipe plant as a conceptual metaphor for evaluating the pervasiveness of whiteness and its disruptions/disturbances/extractions in early learning ecosystems.

Conceptual Metaphor: Ghost Pipe Plant

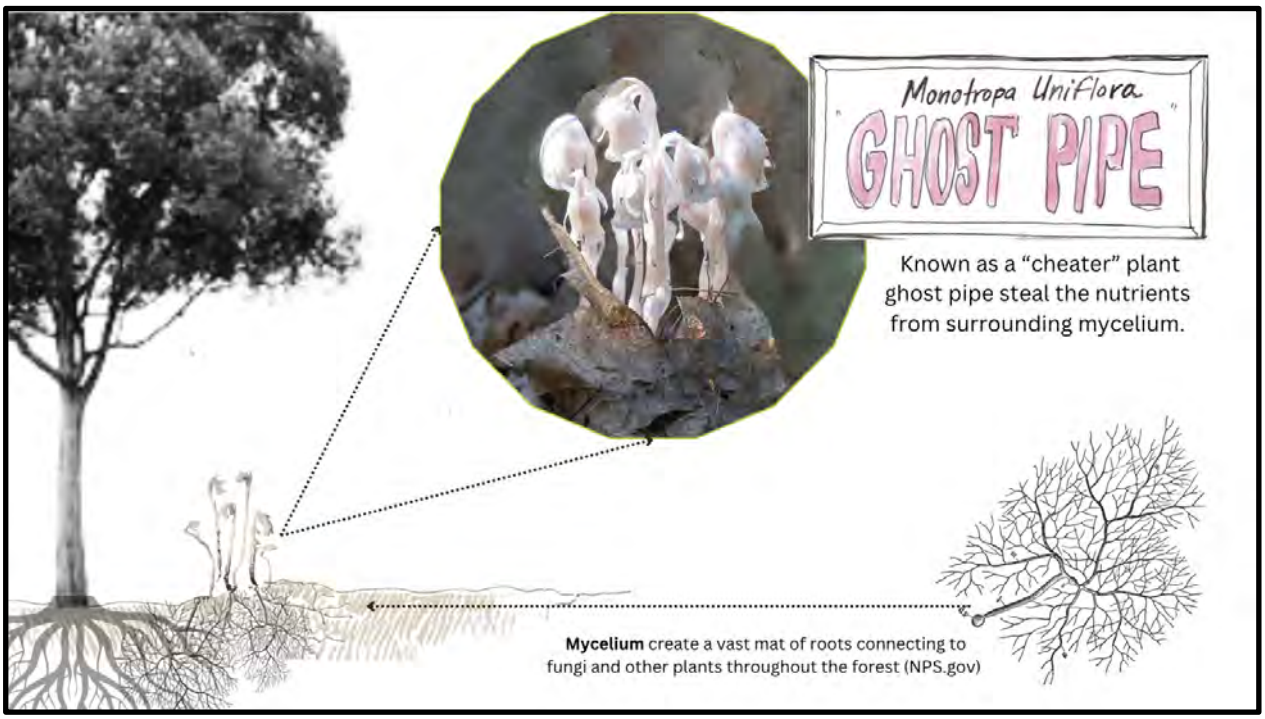

Figure 1. Image of the cheater plant, Monotropa Uniflora, known as the ghost pipe.

The ghost pipe, or *Monotropa Uniflora,* is a rare mycoheterotrophic or parasitic plant that pulls nutrients from the ecosystem around it without giving any benefit back. Ghostly white, this plant lacks the chlorophyll most plants need to survive. These plants grow from a single stalk and flower and flourish in the darkness of the forest floor, huddling in small groups. Said to have been named by Indigenous peoples for their shape, the flowers are fragile and hang in a U-shape until ready to drop seeds to speed their propagation. The ghost pipe plant provides an example of a consumer who does not give back (Davis, 2023). Like the Eurocentric instruction that has been foundational to many U.S. classrooms, the ghost pipe presents a physical presence that consumes;

"whiteness as a parasitic organism that's obsessed by devouring what resides in its' precipice, which is Blackness" (Ohito et. al. 2020). Just as Lethabo-King's (2019) Black shoals are a space of fungibility, for comings and goings, the metaphor pushes us to connect the violence of the past harms from Native and Black communities to the need for future creative practices. In *this* metaphoric turn, the ghost pipe plant is illustrative in acknowledging the omnipresent whiteness that invades early childhood and elementary education and shifting the gaze to Blackness.

America's predominantly white educators and Eurocentric ideals permeate the classroom ecosystem, "feeding" on (anti-Blackness, refusing funds of knowledge, participating in curriculum violence) the surrounding community in their classroom (Sleeter, 2017; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). The ghost pipe, therefore, serves as a metaphoric connection to any educator or system, regardless of racial background or positionality, who exists in a community with Black students and liberatory curricular materials (e.g., children's and picture books), but primarily extracts, demeans, or holds deficit ideas about Blackness within the classroom.

Centering Black aliveness, storytelling, and place within a functional classroom ecology requires interrupting harms and fostering inquiry to amplify Black intellectualism. Examples of curriculum violence (Jones, 2020, 2022) and gross negligence exist in classrooms where a two-year-old Black child is "arrested", handcuffed, and fingerprinted by a white classmate in a role-playing lesson on Rosa Parks (Kainz, 2023). This horrifying story is just one example of a teacher's interactions mirroring that of the ghost pipe. The role play subjugated the Black child and decontextualized the historical importance of Rosa Parks' actions. Examples of teachers' ghost pipe mentality are not just found in classroom practices, but can also be seen in the books they choose that demean children and Black histories (Pitts & James, 2023; Pitts, 2020). The following section describes five of the ghost pipe plant's main attributes and aligned classroom interactions and behaviors.

The Ghost Pipe

1. **Grows a single white flower and stalk.** The ghost pipe plant's thin, nearly translucent stalk supports a five-part flower whose only purpose is to propagate itself. The ghost pipe is self-centered and all about singularity. Educators resemble the ghost pipe when concerned primarily with their success or propagation of ideas or individualism over the collaborative spirit and health of the classroom ecosystem.

2. **It is a parasite**. Acting as a sponge, the ghost pipe draws strength from surrounding mycelium (or web of roots, often including fungi) and the trees around it. Unlike most plant species, this plant does not return anything to the ecological community. In the classroom, we see such parasitic tendencies stemming from the enactment of curriculum violence (Jones, 2022) in instruction, anti-Black ideologies, deficit-oriented beliefs, and *any* classroom policies or practices that undermine the vitality of Black life in schools focus exclusively on pain and subjugation or idealize Westernized/Eurocentric values.

3. **It is fragile.** Once disturbed, the ghost pipe plant cannot be re-grown in captivity. When touched, it disintegrates into pieces. Like the plant, educators can be fragile. Once disturbed, the ghost pipe cannot be grown indoors and may fall apart. When long-standing instructional choices, relational dynamics, and/or curricula are challenged, educators may recenter themselves and deflect from harm by calling attention to their own needs and feelings, doubling down on the importance of restrictive classroom practice.

4. **It is psychotropic**. While the ghost pipe plant has been used as a home remedy when consumed in small quantities, overconsumption can lead to hallucinations (Davis, 2023). In classrooms, whiteness has been overconsumed and normalized, and as a result, distorted the realities and perspectives of a thriving, diverse ecosystem.

5. **It thrives in the dark**. The ghost pipe plant grows in small clusters amongst the dense, dark forest floor, flourishing from the surrounding roots and trees. Black children, families, and communities shine brightly despite the "darkness" they are placed in through inequitable societal conditions and "ghost pipe" ideologies that thrive in their midst. Moreover, in classrooms, educators dim their students' lights rather than amplify the brilliance of their Black students and their collective histories.

A thriving ghost pipe promotes extractive, reductionist behaviors that have real consequences on the students' opportunities to learn and develop in early childhood and elementary classrooms. We must starve the ghost pipe by resisting a narrowing of curricula and overemphasis on authority and surveillance and work to invite a variety of Black experiences and Black literacy expression in the classroom (Ohito, 2020). Early childhood educators must upend the systems of trauma and reductive curriculum that have long been standardized. Starving the ghost pipe and its parasitic tendencies requires attention to the materials and methods we bring into the classroom. We move to consider how educators can denounce ways of being that mirror the ghost pipe and, instead, starve this parasitic plant through the amplification of the stories, lifeworlds, and futures of Black children, families, and communities.

Resisting Ghost Pipe Approaches to Teaching and Learning: "Reversing the Flow"

The ghost pipe teacher's presence, function, and destruction in classrooms cannot be overlooked or ignored. To combat the ghost pipe's impact, we describe ways to "reverse the flow", where educators can centralize teaching *and* texts that honor Black students and communities living and experiencing the world as whole, complex, loved, and empowered beings. Though not a pedagogical framework, this conceptual metaphor enables educators to revise their educational practice, review their classroom materials and curricula with a critical eye, and examine and reflect on their interactions and dispositions with Black children and families. When the flow of the ghost pipe is reversed, educators will see the beauty and richness of Black children's cultures and histories across generations. In this section, we speak back to the ghost pipe's deleterious functions and describe ways to enact early childhood classrooms that honor Black life, promote a pro-Black curriculum, and focus on underscoring the power of Black lives and livelihoods in the classroom ecosystem. In addition, we offer a list of children's books that align with how we believe educators should resist the ghost pipe mentality that seeks to harm and ignore the presence of Blackness in classrooms. Each set of books aligns with a tenet of how we can honor Black life and centers Black people's voices, lived experiences, histories, and cultures.

Honoring Black Life in Early Childhood and Elementary Schools

Challenging Singularity. The curriculum and instruction in early and elementary classrooms often center on dominant or grand narratives of what knowledge(s) and whose knowledge(s) are valued and essential. What Black children and their families know, and experience are often erased from classrooms, and educators hold on to the practices that ignore

what Black children understand and experience, particularly in relationships and in community with one another. A meaningful community can be fostered when the knowledge(s) Black children carry are honored and valued in classrooms. This nurturing will elicit mutualistic relationships and exude an Ubuntu philosophy, honoring the ancient South African word that translates to "I am because we are" or "humanity to others" and embracing collectivism (Boutte et al., 2024). Bringing Blackness into the curriculum through literacy stifles the idea that there is one way to exist and thrive. In this way, Black children are not only centered, but other children are provided opportunities to learn from the knowledge(s) that Black children possess. By taking on a collectivist (rather than individualist) orientation to teaching and learning, educators can reduce tendencies to overemphasize individual successes and focus on protecting and supporting Black children collectively. In addition, educators can highlight relationships with extended families and the centrality of intergenerational love that characterizes many Black homes and communities. Through an engagement with the knowledge(s) Black children and their families bring, educators can resist the ghost pipe's singular focus through relationships and love for the Black community as a whole. The Black children's books featured in the chart include stories depicting community and love. Books like *Soul Food Sunday* by Winsome Bingham and *Dream Street* by Tricia Elam Walker honor and uplift Black families and communities' role in Black children's lives. Across texts, Black children have varying experiences, demonstrating the varied and vibrant nature of Black communal life.

Resisting Parasitism. Black children's early learning experiences have been disproportionately and unfortunately characterized by harmful, punitive disciplinary practices and policies (Hines and Wilmot, 2018), narrowly defined measures of academic success and achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2006), and overrepresentation in exclusionary special education learning contexts (Annamma et al., 2014). Educators can shift these harmful learning environments by investing in children's well-being and holistic identities. By acknowledging the varied talents that Black children bring and building on them (intellectual, artistic, linguistic, etc.), their brilliance will be welcomed, honored, and displayed as regular practice. Classrooms must create space for multiple ways of learning and being. Black children deserve classrooms that nurture them, and teachers committed to honoring their strengths in meaningful ways. Educators must prioritize seeing and believing in Black children's humanity in their pedagogical practices. Importantly, they must protect them from policies and expectations that narrow their ability to demonstrate the full range of their intellect. To counter the parasitic nature of the ghost pipe, books like *Abdul's Story* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow and Tony Hillery's *Harlem Grown: How One Big Idea Transformed a Neighborhood* speak to the resilience and ingenuity of Black people despite the obstacles they encounter, and the misconceptions placed upon them and their communities.

Disrupting Fragility. Early childhood ecosystems must value inquiry because they encourage students' independence and notions of verbal and physical engagement (Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014). In a classroom where fragility has been disrupted, Black students become powerful social actors within the classroom ecosystem, carrying with them expectations and brilliance. Educators can cede power to students while working to create a dialogic space that honors Black students' and communities' funds of knowledge, ancestral gifts, imaginations, and historical ways of knowing. We can disrupt fragility by building classroom spaces that reflect and honor Black children's experiences and welcome multi-modal forms of expression by engaging voice, choice, and agency. Educators can challenge deficit teaching practices by seeing students' callouts and side discussions as evidence of inquiry and engagement, leaning into students'

interests as a platform for class discussion. It is key that educators support the leadership of Black children in the classroom and practice resilience in response to Black families' feedback on their teaching practices and policies. There must be a willingness to learn about and from Black children. To disturb the fragility of the ghost pipe, Tami Charles' *All Because You Matter* and Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow's *Hold Them Close: A Love Letter to Black Children* respect Black children and their histories while honoring how they navigate everyday life.

Confronting Reality. Even though there are rich legacies of Black teachers' contributions to educational theory and Black children's learning (Givens, 2021), Black educators' experiences, stories, and pedagogical insights are not often integrated into the classroom environment. Across time, Black educators have generated blueprints for nurturing Black intellectual success and ways to resist whiteness in schools (Alridge, 2020; Milner & Howard, 2004). Educators must confront the reality that the consequentiality of Black teachers' presences in schools–past and present–continue to be muted. Educators must be willing to amplify the work of their Black teacher colleagues and shine a light on the ways they integrate Black culture and ways of being to "reverse the flow" for Black children. Moreover, we can validate Black language by reading texts like *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes, foreground Black histories with truthful retellings with *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History* by Vashti Harrison, and honor the unique gifts each Black child brings to the classroom by reading books like *Hey Black Child* by Useni Eugene Perkins.

Illuminating Blackness. For too long, Black children have had to contend with schools that do not recognize their intellect or affirm their humanity (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Educators can shift this by interrogating their prescribed literacy curriculum and identifying opportunities to infuse and incorporate images and narratives of Black children, families, and communities. Moreover, it is imperative for literacy classrooms to include stories of Black joy, love, and carefree living (Muhammad, 2023). All children need to see Black people in luminous ways. Alongside stories of joy, educators can amplify Black musicality and the role of music across genres that tell important stories and serve as the soundtracks for Black communities. Early literacy classrooms can also remember to see Black children through a future-oriented lens, with bright paths ahead of them, with lives that should be characterized by expansive/limitless opportunities. Books like Eric Velasquez's *Octopus Stew* and the *Hula-Hoopin Queen* by Thelma Lynne Godin illustrate the inherent joys, rhythms, and thriving spirit of Black culture and life.

Table 1

Resisting Ghost Pipe Approaches Through Black Children's Literature

Ghost pipe Descriptions	**Black Children's Books that starve the ghost pipe & support a flourishing ecosystem**
It grows a single white flower and stalk.	*Dream Street* by Tricia Elam Walker *Soul Food Sunday* by Winsome Bingham *Grandma's Purse* by Vanessa Brantley-Newton *Bedtime Bonnet by Nancy Redd* *Daddy Speaks Love* by Leah Henderson

It is a parasite.	*Abdul's Story* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow *Harlem Grown: How One Big Idea Transformed a Neighborhood* by Tony Hillery *The Me I Choose to Be* by Natasha Tarpley *The ABCs of Black History by Rio Cortez* *Like Lava in My Veins* by Derrick Barnes
It is fragile.	*The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson *Hold Them Close* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow *When Langston Dances* by Kaija Langley *Sulwe by Lupita Nyong'o* *All Because You Matter* by Tami Charles
It is psychotropic.	*Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes *Hey Black Child* by Useni Eugene Perkins *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History* by Vashti Harrison *Blue: A History of the Color as Deep as the Sea and as Wide as the Sky* by Nana Ekua Brew-Hammond *How Do You Spell Unfair? MacNolia Cox and the National Spelling Bee* by Carole Boston Weatherford
It thrives in the dark.	*Stella Keeps Up the Sun* by Clothilde Ewing *Octopus Stew* by Eric Velasquez *Boogie Boogie Y'all* by C. G. Esperanza *Electric Slide and Kai* by Kelly Baptist *The Hula-Hoopin' Queen* by Thelma Lynne Godin

The violence of white supremacy is enacted through overt and covert messages as well as curricula (Kohli et al.., 2017; Au, et al., 2016). Even in the face of current attempts at suppression and censure, early childhood and elementary educators must employ critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies with conviction. By metaphorically starving the ghost pipe, educators pay attention to the flow of information and "nutrients" each child receives and refocus the classroom as a space of mutualism. By challenging anti-Blackness, interrupting exclusionary practices, and providing counternarrative texts, we can attempt to revise the curriculum's Westernized, deficit ideologies about Black people that are woven into schools and literacy classrooms. Educators starving the ghost pipe commit themselves to engaging in justice-oriented practice through an infusion of pro-Black literature, upending the status quo through community-building, and centering Blackness in its fullness and humanity. Educators should re-story and restore the ecosystem, thereby "reversing the flow" in the early childhood and elementary classroom.

Conclusion

As the fight for culturally responsive and antiracist schooling persists—with continued book bans and challenges to curriculum, teacher autonomy, and threats to intellectual freedom through anti-CRT rhetoric, state legislation, and attempted erasure of marginalized histories from the federal government—early childhood and elementary educators cannot maintain neutrality in the face of oppression (Boutte et al., 2011). Moreover, educators must honor Black lives in their work; countering anti-Blackness requires radical love (Matias & Allen, 2016; Starks & Terry, 2023). Educators can ensure Black children's well-being and nurture their academic potential by resisting ghost pipe dispositions, pedagogies, and practices. We must ask ourselves: *if we are not building educational ecosystems for Black thriving, what and why are we building at all*?

In this piece, we detailed the ways that early childhood and elementary classrooms can function as ghost pipes in all–but particularly, Black–children's intellectual ecosystems, starving their academic identities and potential. The ghost pipe is one way to emphasize the essentiality of self-reflection and deep consideration of the effects of pedagogy that does not intentionally value Black people and their lives. We presented ways to recenter and reimagine humanizing spaces for young Black children to learn. We challenge educators to take heed of their own positionalities and of the harm they might be engaging in and to resist the current political attacks on Black (and Brown) thriving in and out of schools. We implore early childhood and elementary classroom educators to see themselves as critical actors in these spaces and not to absolve themselves of challenging the persistent dominant deficit orientations to educate Black children across the U.S., even though our society insists on perpetuating the status quo and attempting to narrow the stories we tell about Black people in schools. Starve the ghost pipe and infuse schools with the vibrancy, vitality, and expansiveness of Blackness, so that young Black children, and all children, might know the fullness of their being.

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