

A Discussion on How the Morning Announcements are Harming Black Children

Michael J. Seaberry
Clark Atlanta University

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There was an unfamiliar act of dying that occurred the moment I realized that I was an active part of a genocide that targets the younger version(s) of myself. A strange dichotomy unveiled itself from hiding within me. On one hand, as a doctoral student, I studied the nuances of how to create liberating spaces for Black boys in K-12 classrooms. On the other hand, I was an enforcer of white rules on Black boys' bodies. I became a cog in the machine that worked to manufacture citizens out of the parts of Black boys that white supremacists deemed worthy for inclusion in their curriculum – compliance and conformity.

When I speak of Black boys in public schools, I speak from first-hand experience – as a student and as a teacher. I speak from the intersections of a Black, Middle-Class, Queer, Southern, Christian male who experienced physical and non-physical acts of racism, classism, and homophobia, mainly from teachers at the small majority white schools in my hometown and the kids they trained to be just like them – a sick type of legacy work. I learned to work through the injustices that occurred because I knew, at the age of five, that these white folks did not want me in their spaces. It took time and family to teach me the wisdom of not living to appease anyone else. So after a wobbly path through the medical field, I found my calling as an educator, working diligently *not* to be like the white women teachers who taught me to hate my body and my intellect.

During graduate school, I sat in classrooms that exposed the inner workings of institutions that were not designed for or by Black people but were given to Black people as a tool of assimilation and integration. I learned about how they push Black boys and girls into special education using disciplinary procedures more than any other school-aged population (Cruz and Firestone, 2022; Morgan, et al., 2015). I read every word of these peer-reviewed articles and edited books as though they were the Holy Bible and, yet, they did not save my soul from enacting evil. As we would say in the Black church: simply knowing the scripture does not mean that you are enacting the goodness of the work. In educational terms, knowing the theories of how Black boys are disproportionately affected does not mean that you are practicing the solutions in real-time.

Now as a curriculum scholar-practitioner, I find it my duty to make people aware that curriculum is in everything. The curriculum is not just the year-at-a-glance document and the pacing guide. It is also the school dress code, the student handbook, the policies and procedures, the photos of other people's children hanging in the hallway, the football team being highlighted in the announcements instead of the Math Bowl winners. Every aspect of the school building and its happenings within and around are indicators of curriculum, both formal and hidden. As my eldest aunt would say, "the children are always watching." When many of these artifacts target Black bodies as needing to be 'tamed,' or as 'unwelcome,' 'too much' or 'out of standard,' then the curriculum is teaching the same Black bodies that they should shrink. That, in their growing and understanding of themselves, their Black bodies are too much for other people to digest. But who gave them permission to assess our bodies?

As you see, there is a passion in my voice when I speak or write about working with Black boys during my tenure as a public-school teacher. Usually, a sense of urgency exudes as I tell the stories where I have personally witnessed forms of violence against Black boys – physical, mental, and emotional. Then a sense of rage manifests itself in the cracking of my voice and the shaking of my hands. When my tone shifts deeper, showing a heaviness in this

conversation, everyone around me can feel the difference. This soliloquy was no longer an assessment of what others have done to little Black boys that remind me of version(s) of me. Instead, “the call” was coming from inside the house. I became disgusted by my own doings in these situations, both passively and actively. I could not continue acting in this system anymore. As Judd (2023) says “Something in my chest is always wailing...the sound that opens wide everything else” (p. 33). There were a few moments, as described below, that caused my soul to finally open wide and wail as loud as it could. These moments have since taught me that I must face this grief that has been brewing in my soul for years. I had no choice but to leave the classroom.

As an act of resistance – an act of survival -- I chose to walk away from the discourses of violence and erasure that pervaded the ever-surrounding curriculum in ways like the structural racism discussed in Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 2013) and the panopticon of white eyes creating docile bodies out of Black boys in public K12 school systems (Foucault, 2012).

As a charge to public-school educators who serve Black and Brown students in any capacity, I write this poetic narrative to task you with speaking truth to power. “A Discussion on How Morning Announcements are Harming the Children” describes the violence I have witnessed against Black boys, the prison-to-school pipeline/nexus that feeds these violent acts, and an educator who is working to change the system. Please know that the stories shared with you in the coming pages are true stories, directly from my experience in Louisiana public charter schools and many other states and districts that see Black boys as a threat. The announcements and the commentary are real. I must emphasize this reality so that you see, even in the smallest details, we are enacting violence against the children who we have vowed to protect.

The Announcements

Imagine walking into your first classroom as a brand-new public-school teacher. You are newly responsible for facilitating safety and learning for 80+ Black and Brown children per day. The responsibility is heavy, and you know that. You sit your items down with a smile on your face, the intercom system buzzes, the students’ volume lowers a tad (but not silent) and this is how the morning announcements go...

Good morning, Friends of _____ School.

There is no excitement in the principal’s tone
Because we all know, too well, that he is warden and not principal
He is Massa and we are trained to work like slaves, both teacher and
student None greater than the other
Both doing labor that feeds a white man’s pockets

Before we begin our day

I would like to remind you of a few rules

This is where the foolery begins
The act put on by white supremacists in Black bodies

Announcement #1: The Social Rules

(For the elementary students)

*Today, we will practice our call and response
When your teacher snaps their finger, you snap
your neck to look at them.*

When called, answer quickly and appropriately.

What he did not mention is that you must answer no matter the name
No matter how much they chop the name your mother and father gave you
You must answer to their immediate call
And smile while doing it

Announcement #2: Safety Concerns

Students, please remember

*For safety reasons, You MUST enter at the student entrance only
At all times, you must walk the halls as though there is a teacher present.
We call that 'integrity.'*

We know too well what it is like for colored folks
To enter in the rear of the building
But you — you must enter at the
side
Where metal detectors fiend for your bones
And guarded men search for your belongings
Remembering that you do not actually belong to any of us
Where white women,
(read as wolves in sheep's clothing)
Train you to always believe their eyes are on you

That they are the judge of what is right and wrong in public spaces
And you must always remember this to be the case

Announcement #3: Your Health Does Not Matter, Neither Does Your Voice

All snacks, water, and contraband items

*Will be taken by security and not returned until the end of the
day Or even better if we feel like it — they will be thrown away*

And we will not care about your thirst
When we tape and cover all water fountains for your
safety From city chemicals being spilled in the reservoir
We rather watch you beg for water (read as mercy) from teachers
When the city says it be too unsafe for consumption
And if you try to step outside of these school walls
In protest
You will be suspended
Cuz we are too scared of what your anger may turn into Why are you mad? Why are you angry
with us?

Announcement #4: This is a War Zone

*Remember that gang fights don't belong in our hallways
You fight, You leave
You win the fight that's 5 days suspension
You lose the fight that's 3*

You return the next day to an office space filled with the boys you threw elbows with
Next to the boys that caught those elbows
And war is created in this perfect space
This den of foolery created by the fools who know no better

Announcement #5: What Being a Man Means

*Reminder that boys are not allowed to wear earrings of any sort on this campus.
We, in an effort to make better men, To make men who know they like women
Will not tolerate anything that looks remotely feminine*

He asked the student "Are you
gay?" I looked in shock.
He gave him two options
If you are, wear your earrings
If you are not,
Take them off
Reminded the student that we here don't do anything that is "other"
We don't do anything that is labeled as different.
We real.
We Black Man real.
We Black angry real.
We try to be as real as we can...for television.

The Discussion

Announcement #1: The Social Rules

I was in the second year of my doctoral program, when I decided to leave my graduate assistantship and jump into the field of education as a classroom teacher. My first assignment was at a local campus of a national charter school system that prided itself on creating docile, trained citizens out of everyday children. Their motto was something of that sordid nature and it hadn't dawned on me that this meant we needed to break the Black kids of all the habits they knew to train them to become 'productive citizens.'

Imagine, during my first day tour of the elementary classrooms, we entered the kindergarten classroom and watched them in their morning routine. Now, here is a stranger – a Black man who looks like them – walking into the room full of Black children, led by white women teachers and a white woman principal. Each time I entered the classroom, the students all turned. Of course, the kids are expected to be distracted. The students all turned and saw a visitor in their room. The teachers only saw misbehaving children with no respect – not citizen-like.

The children's punishment for allowing distraction to set in was to repeatedly practice snapping their necks at the beckon call of a teacher. I watched these white women play a game (laughing included) to see which child could snap their neck the fastest towards the correct person when the teacher's name is called, except this was no game. They practiced with every teacher in the room, including me, watching these children become socialized to having to eagerly find the white woman in their space. When one child got it wrong, they were singled out and disciplined in various forms – one of them was to repeatedly practice it alone, in front of the entire class, embarrassed. It is not lost on me that there were no names involved in this game.

Names of students did not matter, only compliance. There was a strategic stripping of names in a supposedly call and response game that rendered the children's identity as null and void in this space. In secret, they were telling them that who they are does not matter. It only matters that you learn to be respectful and follow the instructions of white women or risk the negative consequences of not doing so. In hindsight, this stripping of names is comparable to the scene in Alex Haley's *Roots*. This scene is best described by ebonyjanice (2023) in her book *All the Black Girls Are Activists*. She begins,

a part of colonization is to change the names of a thing...we can look to the famous and grotesque scene in Alex Haley's *Roots*, where Kunta Kinte is being beaten for refusing to adopt the name the white man gave him... There is an ongoing expectation that Black people, in general, will accept whatever name has been ascribed to them because that's how colonization works. There is an imperialistic mentality that, across land and sea, whatever white supremacist delusion names or ascribes to a thing is what is it... (pp. 83-84)

Announcement #2: Safety Concerns

She yelled down the long hallway. Her voice carried past every door where fifth graders were knee-deep in discussions with their teachers. She bypassed every glass slit in the door that watches the students from outside in, knowing that they cannot see from the inside out. She reprimanded him loudly. This sweet, innocent six-year-old child saw me, one of his favorite teachers, and began to run to me in excitement. To her, this was unacceptable. This was not becoming of a productive citizen and the issue needed to be fixed. "Stop running," she said. "Turn around, go back to the corner, and start again, but this time walking." The child followed her directions with a smile on his face, knowing that the outcome was to get to hug his favorite teacher. I sat there silently watching the entire ordeal, noting that this feels awkward, but knowing that I cannot walk away because the child is depending on me at this moment.

He obliged her requests. When he finished and reached us, she made sure to settle the feeling of embarrassment with,

You always walk in the hallways. Even when no one is around to watch you, I want you to imagine that my eyes are always on you. Everywhere you go I am watching and I want you to conduct yourself as such and always walk indoors. Now, turn around and go practice one more time without me watching and let's see how you behave.

I was shook to say the least. This white woman teacher just convinced a six-year-old Black boy that he is always being watched by her, and in a larger context, he is always being watched by people who do not look like him – i.e. - white women. What message was she sending to the child who just wanted to greet a friend? What did he walk away with after this encounter?

This is not my first time writing about these issues. I published a book chapter titled “Loving to Read and Other Things of Which I Have Become Ashamed” in *Understanding, Dismantling, and Disrupting the Prison-to-School Pipeline* (Seaberry, 2016) that discusses Black boys, masculinity, and the prison-to-school pipeline. In this chapter, I said

Of course, there are many factors that play into the whiteness today’s school systems exhibit, but let us remember that these antagonists are set in place for a reason, to weaken the minds of Black boys, confusing them enough so that they do not know who they are and building them back up to what the system wants them to be - illiterate troublemakers. The idea and purpose for Southern schools has historically been to educate Blacks in preparation for living in the lowest of the economic and social totem poles (Martin, 2015). *This is not a mistake*. Rather, this is an attempt to benefit a market that needs people to drive the free market economy. The school, and prison, system is working just as it has been initially designed to work (Fasching-Varner, Mitchell, Martin, & Bennet-Haron, 2014) (p. 89).

Announcement #3 - Your Health Does Not Matter, Neither Does Your Voice

During my tenure at a charter school in New Orleans, the city announced a boil water advisory. Water advisories were nothing new. Poor water quality was not the problem. The problem was that the water fountains, sinks, and any device that provided water to thirsty children were all bagged and deemed off-limits to anyone in the school. Again, these measures would be acceptable for the safety of our children; however, covering the water fountains continued far beyond the boil water advisory. This restrictive practice was normalized for weeks, maybe months, even though students complained of no available water, except for the bottles provided by teachers, paid for by their personal accounts.

During this same time, there was a national movement, led by high school students, that was designed to fight against one of the many injustices happening in their school buildings. One morning became a beautiful sight to see when students walked out of classrooms, schools, and organization meetings to take a stand against what was occurring across the nation, except in our school building where students were banned from taking a stand. Any student who wanted to participate in utilizing their voice as activists for human rights would be suspended immediately.

I watched as the students sat in agony, wanting to speak up, but scared of the consequences. So I took matters into my own hands. I encouraged them to speak their minds, and stupidly or not, I let them lead the crowd as I followed in the back, supporting and protecting them as we walked outside in protest – together. I share this moment particularly to emphasize that the unjust and unequal society that we live in can also be perpetuated by many in our own Black community, especially some Black elders who are working through the same paradigms as they were during segregation, Jim Crow era, and more (ebonyjanice, 2023). Their survival mindset is to please the majority for safety, but nothing you do will protect you from the systemic issues handed to us by those in power.

New progressive leadership is needed in many schools that serve Black students and it is up to us to hold the current leaders accountable. Operating in a white supremacist society does not mean that you are mandated to recreate the same conditions under which these policies and procedures originated. In fact, it should mean the opposite. It should be an act of resistance. ebonyjanice (2023) says

Elders in our community who want to suggest that our madness is not credible or valid when we express it ascribe to that ideology [regarding not burning bridges] and behavior in an attempt to use our credible anger, disappointment, and frustration against us (p. 95).

Announcement #4 - This is a War Zone

When I speak of elders in our communities that are potentially harming our children, I do not speak lightly. I have not only witnessed student-to-student physical violence, but I have experienced one of the root causes of the ridiculous amount of school discipline infractions – a culture of violence. This particular school curated a culture of violence through poorly chosen words, announcements, activities, and faculty/staff relationships. In the one year that I worked for this school system, I witnessed a teacher being thrown down the stairs during a student fight. I witnessed teachers physically fighting each other. I even witnessed approved boxing matches in hallways, classrooms, and playgrounds. However, the most significant moment of violence that I witnessed was when the Principal attempted to push a conference table towards me in hopes of hurting me and beginning a fist fight. How absurd is that? The leader of the school found himself emotionally unstable as I, an eager 25-year-old freedom teacher, stood against the unjust practices occurring in the school building. I was fed up and decided to take matters to the district-level leadership in hopes that they would see the errors in our daily practices. Instead, the district leaders only saw me as a threat to the system they created – a system that perpetuates violence in schools.

We know it as fact that the above issue is a historical issue of dehumanization (Freire, 2000); however, we must work to elucidate the idea that “the struggle is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is *not* a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed (p. 44).” However, Freire continues to point out that

In order for the struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressed, but rather restorers of the humanity of both (p.44)

Rather, “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students...because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people (hooks, 1994, p. 15).”

Announcement #5 - What Being a Man Means

To fully understand the issue with this particular announcement, one must first understand the difference between respectability politics and the politics of respectability. Ebonyjanice (2023) does an excellent job distinguishing between the two. She says

Respectability politics are defined as a set of beliefs holding that conformity to prescribed mainstream standards of appearance and behavior will protect a person who is part of a marginalized group, especially a Black person, from prejudice and systemic injustices. The politics of respectability is a form of moralistic discourse used by certain people — usually elders, public and prominent figures, leaders, and scholars — who are members of those various marginalized groups, asserting that to look, act, behave, dress, and presents a certain way is to ensure safety inside of an anti-Black capitalist society (p. 17)

Class, what do we notice here? Do you recognize anything familiar? The elders of those marginalized groups, our marginalized groups, are the ones who perpetuate the politics of respectability. However, to their credit, many do it because it is how they had to survive when they were in school. There were certain rules to follow or the consequences could be dire for you, your family, your community, and more.

In this new era – this new generation of students – we cannot afford to police their bodies if we want to truly fight for freedom and beat the oppressive systems in which we are forced to work. We must acknowledge that the body is political. In this, we know

There is no relationship to Black bodies on this continent separate from politicization.

The body of the Black person is here in the United States of America as a result of something political. It was made legal to bring this body here. It was made legal to force this body to do what it was forced to do. It was made legal to kill the Black body.

So caring for this Black body is a way to subvert the politics that has historically exploited the political site that is constantly in resistance just by existing.

And resistance can look like an earring in a boy's ear. Resistance can be a heterosexual male navigating his own masculinity through clothing and appearance. Who are we to tell him no?

The Solution(s)

I often say that these morning announcements sit at the intersection of anger and grief. To be honest, I am not sure if it is because I am angry at the system or if the system shows its anger towards us, but I know that a little bit of both emotions are present most of the time. The grief, however, comes with the work. The grief is the burnout we feel after watching so many of our students experience the traumas set up for them in the current state of education – poverty, violence, dehumanizing classroom management skills, and more. The grief is knowing that we may play a role in the system that actively works to weaken, desensitize, and kill our Black students.

When I finally chose to address this grief, I did so, because I had come to a point where I simply could not continue walking into a school building that is not designed for me, my students, or the local community it is supposed to serve. I was tired of forcing myself to find the diamond in the rough just to survive a workday in a hostile environment.

“Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated (Freire, 2000, p. 65).”

When I think of solutions, I first think of Audre Lorde's (2003) "*The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*." She has warned us for years that our freedom from oppression will not be found in the same tools in which our oppressors built these systems. We must stand differently and teach emphatically to show a difference. This is why I left. I wanted to create that change. I left the K12 classroom to focus on my scholarship, to have more flexibility in my schedule for educational activism, and, most importantly, to teach and train pre-service and in-service teachers to not harm Black boys with their words.

*Even since before 1955, white women have taken law into their hands.
They feign the innocent role in the cut out eyes of their husband's Klan robes and choose to
chase burning crosses in the form of Black men, women, and children.
We saw Emmett Till's murderers beckon to the call of a white woman's lies and believe her.
We ain't know it then, but this was the prerequisite to classes on how to violate Black children in
their innocence.
This woman whose name I refuse to speak — as to not give life to her vicious deceit — wrote the
curriculum for the education of Black kids today.
And don't we see the parallel?*

*Allow these Black children into your store to shop — to look for what they yearn for most
Something like candy or snacks or — knowledge
Interact with them as an innocent purveyor of the truth
Make them feel welcomed in your store — in your
classroom
Complete a transaction — take their money for your
product
Don't tell them that your product comes with caveats
Like you get the candy, but it comes with death
You get the knowledge, but it comes with respectability
politics
You get the grade, but it comes with accommodations because we don't believe folks like you can
do it on your own*

*When they leave the store, have them followed
As if we don't know that our kids are tracked beyond the district they graduated from
As if we ain't aware that these kids, these babies, are shuffled through as numbers, papers,
insignificant objects
And are we not tired yet?*

*We see in our own streets how a white woman deputized herself as law and chased a Black man
to his death
We see in our school system how white women make decisions on what social and emotional
means to Black kids
And we been complicit in this work.*

*We took the curriculum for the death of Black kids and enacted it in our classrooms
Both Black and white alike.
And ain't we gon' do something about it now?*

*Ain't every step we take in this march giving beats as the soundtrack to the
revolution? Won't we highlight what the Black kids are doing in this district?
How they revolutionize their bodies to fight against white women making decisions about
them from federal seats.
How they show up in the midst of a pandemic and Black bodies being murdered on their city
streets.*

How they are angry that their own police officers pulled guns on their classmates with no public remorse for threatening the very bodies they protect.

*How they greet police officers paid for by the school district every morning next to metal detectors
and ain't that a good morning for them?*

*How these kids be a hail mary in the middle of a war zone
But the system isn't designed to allow their prayers to be heard by those in power
The ceilings built above classrooms don't allow the words spoken and cried by students to be heard by those sitting above them
Those who refuse to come down and sit with their people*

*What good would it have been if Jesus never sat with his disciples?
What if He decided not to wash the feet of His people?
Who suffers then?*

*And every day that I enter and exit my classroom — whether virtual or traditional
I cry Lord, forgive them
Lord, forgive me
For we know not what we do
The students have the answers.
The students have the education.
The students have the voices.
We, the educators and administrators and parents and citizens, have to sit down and listen.
And when we listen, we must amplify.
We must stand next to students and protect them.
Protect them all.
Because I have known that I would not be here on this earth if I did not have students who were in the fight with me.
I was born tired.*

*But there are pillars that stand in front of me every day and what good of a teacher would I be if I didn't hold those pillars up?
Imagine then what power we can have
To change the narrative of white women crusaders,
Black death at the hands of inequity,
And educational institutions that do not center the lives of their Black children
Imagine then what this world could look like.*

Bio:

Dr. Michael J. Seaberry is a tenure-track Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Clark Atlanta University. His research explores Black male identities, liberatory pedagogy, and the hidden curriculum in educational spaces. He is committed to building pathways where education becomes a site of resistance, healing, and collective transformation.

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