

When worlds collide: Race, motherhood, and researcher-participant connections

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Ask a Black mother about the first time she held her baby in her arms and this researcher can assure readers that before she verbalizes a response, the joy that burns so deeply within her soul and which defies description will radiate forth from her visage, infusing her countenance with an iridescent glow. I further invite readers—if mothers or scholars are among them—to then pause and re-experience the emotions that the memory elicits as these guide us to a place of reflection, a path toward understanding, and an opportunity for connection, particularly as the present narrative unfolds. While the annals of research literature on the experiences of Black Canadian mothers in relation to their children’s experiences in school settings continue to grow (Brady, 2022; Fearon, 2022; Hall & Berman, 2022), what remains less explored, to some extent, are personal reflections on the ways in which the research experience impacts individual researchers or, put another way, “the story within the story.” My study on Black mothers’ perspectives on anti-racism in early learning became more than data collection—it was a personal journey of connection and storytelling. Through reflective research memos, I explore moments where researcher and participant met not just as academic and participant, but as Black women and mothers navigating shared realities.

Qualitative research is widely favored by researchers seeking to understand a particular phenomenon from the perspective of the participants. Indeed, qualitative research allows scholars to engage with study participants, contextualize their stories, and in some respects, enter their socio-cultural worlds; in fact, as such subjective processes evolve, researchers and participants may forge profound connections through the method of shared personal histories. By way of reflection, when I interviewed Black Canadian mothers in 2023 to learn more about how they viewed DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) initiatives, anti-racism policies, and anti-bias procedures in the context of their child’s early learning settings, I found that their perspectives on managing childcare centers were responsive to their children’s racial and cultural identities. Accordingly, the present paper includes pertinent albeit informal reflections on conducting a focus group with Black mothers of young children (particularly the moments when I connected with the participants—to wit, when “our worlds collided”). While the opportunity to participate was given to all parents of children enrolled in the associated centers, regardless of racial group membership, only three Black mothers participated.

In the interest of a more creative organizational strategy and for the sake of clarity, such an approach surveys my research memos, categorized by theme, to illustrate the connections between the participants and myself. Although our shared

stories reflect similar experiences—in anecdotes that bridge research gaps via our shared humanity as Black women and mothers—these are often overlooked or absent from the existing literature.

Memo One: Differential Treatment

I am in the kitchen. The focus group lasted longer than I expected and now, I am emotionally drained. I think I should eat something. Maybe a bit of nourishment will help me to process how I am feeling. My mind wanders again. I approach the fridge; I open the door, but the emotional impact of the interview has left me a bit disoriented. When she spoke about her experience and how they treated her daughter, I felt the pain in her voice. The fridge door is still open. I do not think I am hungry anymore. She knows that I am a mother, too. Suppose it was...? With a heavy heart, I leave the kitchen. I take refuge in solitude, in the confines of my spiraling thoughts. I remind myself, this is why I am so passionate about anti-racism in early childhood education. This is why I can't relent. This is why I must persist. I do it for them, for the children.

Memo Two : Mental Health and Equal Access

I am reading through the transcripts while in the initial stage of a thematic analysis. She repeatedly emphasizes the importance of childcare centers being safe. I remember the tone of her voice when she explained the negative impact on her mental health: the constant agitation, the fears, the anxiety. I am transported back to the day I dropped him off at daycare. He cried so intensely that I could not bear to leave him, even though it was a safe center and we knew the teachers well. I remember the pain I felt seeing him in tears. Without saying another word and much to the educators' surprise, I picked him up, took his belongings, and we left the facility. Holding him gently in my arms, I comforted him and whispered, "Don't cry, baby, I am not leaving you." Yet, in the interest of full transparency and scholarly integrity, I must acknowledge that not all mothers have such a privilege. And while Ontario and Quebec offer subsidized child care programs, are these truly equitable? More importantly, what policies are needed to ensure that Black Canadian families—and above all, Black mothers—have access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education? What are the barriers to access? Is it possible to create a national anti-racist policy in early childhood education that would guide programming and policies in centers across the country, or am I being a bit too optimistic and perhaps somewhat naïve?

Memo Three : “Just let Them be Happy” in Anti-Racist Classrooms

My parenting practices have been marked by joy, music, laughter, and a lot of play! When he was a preschooler, we did plenty of pretend play, acting out nursery songs, rhymes, and storytelling. Many years may have passed since then, but I can still hear his giggles, his laughter, his requests to hear the silly songs one more time. Joy is a child’s human right. The mothers in my study, in their unique way, echo the same desire: that is, to see their children happy. Indeed, what they value most in a childcare setting was a learning environment that brought joy to their child’s heart and spirit. The way parents conceptualized joy was akin to a sense of freedom or peace, a place where the children are free to be who they are without the fear that they may be exposed to biased views or unfair treatment. Additionally, the mothers felt that overtly anti-racist centers—centers that openly embrace educators and staff who reflect their children’s racial background—were important to them.

Suggestions for Researchers

Qualitative research affords scholars unique opportunities to confront, question, and engage with the diversity and complexity of human emotions, especially when such investigations are expressly designed to obtain insight into sensitive topics with the participation of racialized or marginalized communities. Echoing Wincup’s (2001) work, in my research, “the data analysis process served as a constant reminder of who I had met, the problems they had experienced, and the emotions they displayed when telling their stories” (p. 29). While emotional awareness challenges researchers to preserve the integrity of the participants’ stories and advocate on their behalf (Wincup, 2001)—which is essential to conducting research with sensitivity—the existing literature underscores the value of self-care practices in mitigating the impact of emotionally charged research as they ensure the health and well-being of researchers. Specifically, researchers have employed various strategies to cope with the at times difficult emotional labor associated with conducting sensitive and emotionally charged studies; for instance, Reed and Towers (2023) leveraged peer discussions to effectively process their experiences, whereas Johnson (2009) employed a more comprehensive approach, combining professional counseling with reflective journaling to navigate the emotional vicissitudes inherent in research that draws heavily on participants’ personal histories (and that may also reflect researchers’ lived experiences).

Consistent with Lustick’s (2021) “emotional coding” framework, guided questions assist researchers in facilitating awareness and exploration. Such queries are intended

to help identify and interpret the complex interplay between the researcher's feelings, participants' emotions, potentially influential socio-cultural factors, and how these connections intersect with the study. The following lines of inquiry can be used to prompt meaningful reflection:

1. How do the participants' experiences impact the researcher emotionally?
2. What do these emotions reveal about the researcher's connection to the participants or the research topic (alternatively, what can I learn about myself or my connection to the participants)?
3. What underlying factors contribute to the emergence of these emotions, or impact their "root cause"?
4. How can these stories and emotions inform strategies to improve the participants' lives and contribute to a deeper understanding of the research context?

Conclusion

When we are privy to another's story and identify significant parallels between their experiences and our own, do we remain the same? On the other hand, does the validity and perhaps the reassurance ("it's not only me") that the identification with another may provide then motivate or strengthen our commitment to addressing specific ideological and pedagogical issues with a mind to changing the dominant narrative for the better? In my case, esteemed reader, these experiences further reinforced my commitment to advocating for Black children and their families. Although I consider myself both a researcher and an academic, my positionality as a Black woman and a mother affords me a particular worldview and rouses a dedication that transcends scholarly interests or intellectual pursuits. While it may be argued that as a scholar, I benefited from conducting such research, I would add that, in this case, the rewards I gained from speaking with the mothers were not limited to the academic sphere. The real reward, the one that inspired me to write this piece by laying bare my heart, was that for a moment in time, I was the participants' confidante in shared circumstances as simply another mom lending a kind ear in the communal space that we created to exchange personal stories. There, Black mothers were truly heard, and that was my reward. To those mothers, I offer my most heartfelt gratitude. Our worlds collided in kinship but unlike the unfortunate accident that such a verb implies, ours was a tender form of collision where souls met, united, and healed. Undeniably, we left the scene intact.

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