

United Nations 3rd Permanent Forum on People of African Descent
Panel #2 Education: Overcoming Systemic Racism and Historic Harms

United Nations, Geneva Switzerland, Room XX
Civil Society Organization: “Solitude International Research Consortium for Women and Girls of African Descent

Wednesday, 17 April from 15:00 (3:00) to 18:00 (5:00) p.m.
Statement of Dr. Avon Hart-Johnson, Contact: avonhartjohnson@gmail.com

I am Dr. Avon Hart-Johnson, with the Solitude International Research Consortium for women and girls of African descent. I am an author, researcher, and educator and the co-founder of DC Project Connect a Washington, DC, community organization supporting families and children impacted by carceral systems. Today, I stand proxy for millions of preschool children of African descent, in the United States who face conditions of criminalization and arrest in *preschools* that have, to date, gone unchallenged. These abysmal practices add yet one more layered pathway and risk toward children of African descent entering the U.S. prison system. There have been recent incidents of 5- and 6-year-old children, experiencing direct maltreatment by embedded police officers known as: “school resource officers” (Heitzeg, 2014; Theriot, 2009).

Characterizing young children as dangerous, problem-children, provides a convenient metanarrative or tactic used by stakeholders, school administrators, legislators, and politicians to minimize the destructive nature of historical and current educational racism. Reframing the narrative minimizes the harms caused by policies and practices executed in these school systems and downplays the associated trauma experienced by children of African descent. In essence, Black children become the “problem child” where the non-black child is considered “a child with a problem,” (Freidus, 2020, p. 550). These characterizations and linguistic tactics minimize school administrative staff’s guilt and relieves stakeholders of the responsibility for standing up for young children who face dehumanizing treatment in response to developmentally expected behaviors, such as tantrums (Sperling, 2020). Instead, such behaviors as tantrums and acting out –are met with police brutality that can have lingering traumatic affects across a child’s lifespan. Harvard Medical School indicated that tantrums should be met with acknowledgement, empathy, which can help children regulate their emotions. Between 10 and 20% of these children may already have anxiety disorders (Cleveland Clinic, 2023).

Background

Preschoolers of African descent are disproportionately targeted for expulsion, detention, and face the highest law enforcement referrals and school-related arrests¹. Black children account for 15% of enrollment in public schools, yet they account for 18% of law enforcement referrals, and 22% of school related arrests (U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Division [U.S. DECRD], 2023). School resource officers, generally trained to police society, see their role as enforcing compliance and adherence to the law in school environments

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(Education Week, 2021). According to a recent survey conducted by the Education Week Research Center (2021), approximately 86% of school police carry guns, 95% carry handcuffs, and 37% carry tasers¹.

In these settings, if a Black child behaves in a manner that is not understood by school staff, children’s dysregulated behaviors are often met with police officer zip ties, or they are placed in “scream rooms” or arrested (see Algar, 2023).² Between 2020- 2021, nearly 1,000 public preschoolers received suspension, 220 preschoolers were expelled and, over 100 preschoolers between ages 5 and 6 years old were arrested³.

The continued adverse treatment of young children of African descent is a threat to affected children’s future academic achievement. These practices and protocol cannot continue under the international watch, unchallenged. According to the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (1960), children have the right to inclusive education as a Human Right. Paulo Freire indicated that *talking about these problems is not enough. We must act* (Freire, 1996)!

We implore the international community to pressure the United States to adhere to UNESCO and become a signatory for the UN Conventions for the Rights of the Child² and abide by it. These conditions taking place in many U.S. schools should be of global concern, to prevent this model from being replicated around the world.

Recommendations

Educational human resources and pedagogy should shape and cultivate children’s minds –rather than leave them feeling unsafe and traumatized. Yet many U.S. education systems have become systems of oppression where children of African Descent and indigenous children are targeted for punitive practice. Conspicuously, the United States has continued to refrain from becoming a signatory for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This

¹ Education Week Research Center (2021). Nearly 400 SROs were surveyed; average demographic: age 48, race: white males, years in law enforcement average 19 years; majority minority school hallways, and the majority consider their roles law enforcement aligned.

² Algar, Seim. (2023). Six-year-old Kaia Rolle, was arrested during 2019, placed in zip ties at Lucious and Emma Nixon Academy charter school, Orlando, Florida. Grandmother, Meralyn Kirkland indicated Kia still suffers trauma.

³ U.S. DECRD. (2023). In that same timeframe about 3,500 referrals were made to law enforcement and school related arrests. Children 5 and 6 years old are referred to law enforcement, zip tied and are restrained and sent to police stations.

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would be a step in the right direction towards ensuring child well-being. With the aforementioned conditions and background, the following recommendations are put forth to the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent. Each of these recommendations are specific to the United States, where pressure to conform should be presented to the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Division. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, would be instrumental in assisting with this matter.

Recommendation 1: We must not normalize trauma-producing behaviors by *policing* preschoolers. At a minimum, behavioral health training with multicultural and social justice competence training should be funded for every public school system employee (Ratts et. al., 2014–2015). This training does not negate the damage already done. However, it may prevent other children from experiencing harm. Further, all schools receiving federal funding should immediately ban the use or restraints on children, the use of “scream rooms—a form of solitary confinement” and enact the “Keeping all Student Safe Act” as a first step (see legislation below, S. 125. Sen. Chris Murphy). This Act has been introduced repeatedly for the past ten years. As a world, we must ask, what keeps us from protecting our most vulnerable citizens? A 5- or 6-year-old girl should never have to plead with a law enforcement officer, screaming “No, please no. I don’t want to go in the police car.” Those were the words of Kaia Rolle. A little child, arrested for her tantrum and acting out behaviors in a Florida school (Algar, 2023).

Recommendation 2: Prohibit the use of law enforcement officers in elementary schools, replacing them with mental health counselors and behavioral health practitioners as detailed in the following legislation introduced by Senator Christopher Murphy: S.125 Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act, 117th Congress, 2021 - 2022. Introduced June 17, 2021. [<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/2125>]

Recommendation 3: Demand that the United States establish nation-wide federal funding for children’s therapeutic and trauma relief and training for every educator and administrator. Provide child-centered, trauma-responsive support for all preschool children (such as adequately staffed counseling and mental health resources).

Recommendation 5: We must address systemic racism. Dismantling oppressive school system policies involve acknowledging and undoing these inequitable structures and practices, such as biased disciplinary policies and unequal resource allocation. All

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students should have access to quality education and support. Unbiased schools are not just a moral imperative; it is essential for creating a more just, equitable, and inclusive society. Providing resources acknowledging the intergenerational trauma promoted through system racism in educational settings and other institutions.

In closing, we must hold accountable the human resources who actively perpetuate irreversible harms and trauma to children in educational settings. Moreover, having the “youth representative/voice” to serve on the Permanent Forum is very important as they can relate to or attest to challenges of bias and racism in schools. All schools should be designed to nurture every child’s dignity, growth, and personal development.

Additional Considerations

Decolonizing pedagogy calls for informing and liberating children rather than invalidating their histories. In this process of erasure, ancestral legacies become reframed, omitted, purposely hidden to the point of invisibility, and reframed accounts of scientific discovery, invention, and legacy are replaced with narratives that replace the truths. Thus, the Pan Atlantic Slave Trade become narratives of the past- out of sight and conveniently filtered to enable those in denial personal responsibilities for their ancestral economic gains. It is on the backs of slaves that many of the prominent families in America have accrued generational wealth. We must not forget that colonization has left a brutal stain on people of African descent around the globe. The deliberate erasure, extraction of knowledge history and culture, are methods to undervalue people of culture. With these ideas in mind, additional considerations follow.

Address Systemic Inequities: The U.S. education system has historically perpetuated systemic inequities, disproportionately impacting Indigenous, Black, and other marginalized communities.

Illuminate Historical Injustices: that often perpetuates the erasure of African Descent, Indigenous, and other marginalized peoples' histories, cultures, traditions, and legacies as well as contributions. Decolonizing schools involves acknowledging and rectifying this historical injustice by incorporating diverse perspectives and narratives into the curriculum.

Promote Healing and Reconciliation: Decolonizing education is a step towards healing and reconciliation for Indigenous and other marginalized communities who have been

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historically marginalized and oppressed. By centering Indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives, schools can contribute to the restoration of cultural pride, identity, and resilience.

Prepare Children for a Diverse World: In today's globalized world, cultural competence and understanding are essential skills. Decolonizing schools prepares students to navigate diverse perspectives and experiences, fostering empathy, collaboration, and cross-cultural communication skills that are crucial for success in an increasingly interconnected society.

Cultural Relevance: Many students come from diverse cultural backgrounds, yet the curriculum often reflects only a narrow Eurocentric perspective. Decolonizing schools means embracing cultural relevance by including content that reflects the experiences, languages, and traditions of all students, fostering a sense of belonging and pride in one's cultural heritage – without exploiting these differences.

Promote Critical Thinking and Empowerment: Decolonizing education encourages critical thinking and analysis of power structures, challenging students to question dominant narratives and systems of oppression. By providing a more inclusive and critical education, students are empowered to engage with the world as informed and active citizens, capable of advocating for social justice and equity.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony orally and in written form.

Respectfully,

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Endnotes

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² United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.