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The Spirit Murdering of Black Kindergarteners by the Lock and Load Literacy Routine

by Amber Lawson

One of Michigan's largest public education school systems, a historically multicultural district, recently provided their teachers with professional development to better support learners in kindergarten through second grade. Specifically, kindergarten teachers received training on Brainspring's Phonics First Program (brain-spring.com), which included a "lock and load" strategy designed to teach students high-frequency words while using kinesthetic movement. While implementing the strategy, students are taught to emulate shooting guns with their arms while saying and spelling high-frequency words. I learned about the strategy from a teacher in the district as she was completing the self-paced e-learning training. This piece urges readers to reconsider this or any similar strategy, especially for Black children, but any children.

When I was first introduced to strategy by its name, *lock and load*, the first thing that came to mind was guns. Guns were and still are harmful today to the Black community, especially given the realities of police brutality. In her book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, Muhammad (2020) shares an excerpt from a Black newspaper from 1896. In the article, a White sheriff shot into a crowd of Black boys, killed one of the boys, wounded others, and claimed he was ordered to shoot over the crowd. Over one hundred years later, the same senseless killings of Black bodies occurs in our communities across our nation. Fast forward to the present day; we have witnessed the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ma'Khia Bryant, and others. Even with the heightened protest during the pandemic to demand police officers stop killing Black people and calling it "public safety," a strategy such as lock and load found its way into many Black children's home-away-from-home—their classroom.



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Teachers must take into consideration the trauma students experience. In the United States, "individuals carry out countless offenses against...Black bodies on a daily basis and it's killing...[the Black community] slowly but surely" (Philips, 2021, p. 1), both physically and spiritually (Muhammad, 2020; Love, 2016). For example, a kindergartener may have lost a family member or a member in the Black community to gun violence or police brutality. Imagine being a five-year-old dealing with emotions of grief and unexpected loss, going to school and being told to "lock and load." As a five-year-old, you may not have the words to express your emotions, and what if a teacher views resistance to the strategy as disengagement and defiant? As a result, learning to read becomes traumatizing in addition to everything else you are experiencing. While this large school district is not the creator of the strategy, as educators of Black children, members of the district should be aware of the potential agony the lock and load strategy could cause students.

At the same time, implementing the lock and load strategy sends a double standard message to students. Suppose a student brings a toy gun or an actual gun to school—as one student did during the horrifying Oxford High School shooting tragedy. In these cases, the student would receive consequences by the school's

Must Read Texts

or district's policy. Nevertheless, a double standard is enacted when teachers are allowed to implement the strategy for literacy instruction, while causing harm to learners at the same time. Implementing the lock and load strategy for literacy instruction can ignite trauma for students who experienced a peer bringing a gun to school.

When Black families send their children to school, they would like to believe they send their children to learn in safe environments. They would like to think their children are safe physically, emotionally, academically, and free of harm. However, when children, specifically Black children, are learning how to read in kindergarten using a strategy such as lock and load, quite the opposite is happening. While the program supports the advancement of students' literacy development overall, it is crucial for teachers to be aware that the lock and load strategy can impact students' overall well-being and contribute to the spirit murdering of young Black children. Love (2016) defines spirit murdering as "the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism" (p. 2).

Young Black children are vulnerable because of the structures of racism "under this White supremacist delusion made possible by...anti-Blackness" (Philips, 2021, p. 1). As educators, we must be aware of students' vulnerability. We cannot only educate students academically. We must educate and cultivate the whole child, including their socio-emotional wellbeing. We must know our students' lived experiences and histories to provide more just and equitable learning opportunities. We fail our Black students when we implement such harmful strategies. Such a callous strategy implies that young Black bodies are not viewed as worthy vessels for safekeeping and protection (Philips, 2021).

As Muhammad (2020) argues, "the critical need for a culturally responsive pedagogy is best exemplified when we connect the past to the present and witness the lack of progress we have made as a country" (p. 53). To be more culturally responsive, I urge teachers to reconsider using the strategy's physical movements and to consider

calling the strategy by a different name. Teachers could allow students to collaborate as a class to think of an object that can be pulled and released, such as a familiar toy. They could work together to rename the strategy and routine. This collaboration and contribution from students may increase students' engagement in learning high-frequency words without harming Black students in their classroom. I would like to see schools provide students a more just and equitable learning opportunity when learning how to read, considering literacy is key to academic success (Cartledge et al., 2015).

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