

Conceptualizing Child Abuse Advocacy Through Post-Structural Feminism and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Lens

Dr. Leta Hooper

Bowie State University

Abstract

School personnel represent the largest demographic of mandated reporters for child maltreatment. However, numerous unreported cases of child maltreatment from school personnel have raised concerns about prospective teachers being prepared for mandated reporting. This paper illustrates how a course activity utilized Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and post-structural feminism to aid pre-service teachers in conceptualizing their role in advocacy and critiquing the function of systems and structures for a child abuse case in Maryland. This work highlights the benefits of integrating post-structural feminist theories into teacher preparation courses to raise awareness about children's rights, examine the power dynamics between adults and children, promote strategies for preventing and advocating against child maltreatment, and emphasize the need for support systems to address teachers' secondary traumatic stress.

Keywords: child maltreatment, advocacy, post-structural feminism, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems

Child maltreatment is a global epidemic that negatively impacts children's physical, emotional, mental, and cognitive development and ability to live (Deliveli, 2023; Dinehart & Kenny, 2015; Patton, 2017; Rahimi et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2021). Patton (2017) drew upon research to highlight how consistent yelling, belittling, threatening, and hitting negatively impact children's brain development, contributing to low IQ, irritability, anxiety, aggressiveness, hypervigilance, depression, substance abuse, dysfunctional relationships, and future domestic violence. According to the U.S. Children's Bureau 2024 child maltreatment report, 558,899 children and youth were victims of child abuse in 2022, and approximately 1,990 children and youth died from abuse and neglect (Children's Bureau, 2024). Child Protective Services' (CPS) response and delivery of prevention and post-reporting services increased for children and families from 2022 to 2024.

School personnel represent the largest demographic of mandated reporters (Rapoport et al., 2020). For pre-service teachers, teacher candidates, and novice teachers, compliance with this mandate can be

high stakes. Teachers hold a prominent position in society, interacting with children daily and being keenly aware of differences in a child's behavior (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015). However, numerous unreported cases of child maltreatment from school personnel have raised concerns about prospective teachers being prepared for mandated reporting. To address this issue, the state of Maryland enacted the Maryland Child Protection Act in 2022. Under this law, mandated reporters face imprisonment and a \$10,000.00 fine for failing to comply with the policies on reporting any cases of child sexual abuse. This law was proposed and passed in response to several teachers at a local public elementary school in Maryland failing to report suspicions of their colleague sexually exploiting children at the school.

Research found that insufficient training and preparation for teachers to detect, report, and prevent abuse have resulted in unreported cases of students experiencing maltreatment (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015; Rahimi et al., 2021). Reasons for this include limited knowledge about identifying symptoms of child maltreatment, fear of retaliation from families or colleagues, concerns about the impact on children

Conceptualizing Child Abuse Advocacy

when families are displaced, a lack of understanding of prevention and intervention strategies, concern about children being separated from their families, and vague reporting procedures and definitions (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015).

Researchers have reported how subjectivity in mandated reporting has contributed to racial disparity in the child welfare system, with Black families specifically targeted (Chandler-Cole, 2024; Roberts, 2022; Roberts, 2023). Chandler-Cole (2024) argued that mandated reporting training without cultural competency and awareness of mental health stressors or poverty conditions could result in the reporter exercising implicit bias and subjectivity that target impoverished families and families of color as suspects of child maltreatment. These experiences have led to traumatic experiences for families and children, especially children being displaced from their families (Patton, 2017; Roberts, 2022). In response to this approach, organizations and scholars have pushed for an alternative pathway for reporting child abuse, maltreatment, and neglect. In this approach, professionals responding to child abuse are referred to as mandated supporters. This approach involves home visits and parental programs that offer workshops on alternative discipline practices and accessibility to resources for sustainable living (Myers, 2023; Patton, 2017).

Purpose

To support pre-service teachers in developing a deeper understanding of the state requirements for mandated reporters, their roles and responsibilities as a mandated reporter, and the systemic factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of Black and Brown children in the foster care system (Deliveli, 2023), I designed an assignment in which they explored a real-life case of child abuse that occurred in a local affluent community. In this article, I

explain how a multi-layered activity assigned in a family, school, and community partnerships course for an early childhood special education teacher education program at a historically Black college and university (HBCU) can be used for pre-service teachers to develop an awareness of the importance of understanding conditions of child abuse and neglect.

HBCU teacher education programs have played an instrumental role in diversifying the teaching force's demographic, specifically contributing to the increase of Black teachers (Mawhinney et al., 2012). Since HBCUs are overwhelmingly comprised of Black students, courses in these higher education institutions need to explore topics that are deemed private, taboo, and culturally sensitive in the Black community to produce environments that are healthy and safe for everyone in the Black community. In the book *Spare the Kids: Why Whipping Children Won't Save Black America*, Patton (2017) noted how Black parents' physical and verbal discipline practices toward their children are recognized as acceptable forms of punishment in the Black community. This belief deemed corporal punishment as an effective disciplinary practice for children. It is deemed a form of protection to prepare Black children and youth to successfully navigate a racialized society. Patton (2017) further added how corporal punishment is associated with the trauma Black people encountered during enslavement and how Black parents upheld these practices to teach their children racial etiquette to prevent being beaten or lynched by white¹ people. However, Patton (2017) problematized how corporal punishment is symbolized as a core pillar of responsible parenting in the Black community and questioned the effectiveness of physical and harsh discipline practices that are touted and supported by Black parents and clergy leaders. Patton (2017) described how Black parents were not exposed to a variety of caregiving practices during enslavement

1 The letter, "W" in white and whiteness is lowercase throughout the article. This approach supports the work of Critical Race Theory as it recognizes the language in text and how it can reinforce racial hierarchy (Matias, 2020).

and the Jim Crow era. Patton (2017) pointed out that these practices have not decreased but have increased the state-sanctioned violence Black children and youth commonly experience, which has led to the mass killings and incarceration of Black children and youth.

In the early part of the course, the pre-service teachers learned about Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (1995). Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (1995) acknowledges how the individual's interactions and experiences with each system and the workings of one or more systems can shape human development (Lockhart, 2021). These systems are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Destabilization or negative experiences in one of the systems can impact the progression of a person's experience and development. Therefore, bioecological systems theory encourages pre-service teachers to analyze how the environments, interactions, and events that occur over time shape the child's experiences, social interactions with adults and peers, behavioral patterns, and engagement in activities both within and beyond the school setting. Patton (2017) supported this notion by arguing that when children are exposed to adverse environments in which they are belittled, hit, and yelled at, their brain development is influenced. This can lead to low IQ, quick temper, hypervigilance, aggressive behaviors, depression, suicide, engagement in sexual activities, and substance abuse. Providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to identify and analyze the various structures of bioecological systems in real-life scenarios encourages them to critique the systems that are or are not meeting the needs of children and adolescents (Cornell & Verlenden, 2020).

Critiquing and Analyzing Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Through a Post-Structural Feminism Lens

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory focuses on how cultural, historical, social, economic, and political elements shape human development. However, Bronfenbrenner's research has garnered criticism due to its failure to examine the experiences of underrepresented people such as people of color, particularly, women and children of color. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's research has been criticized for not explicitly addressing how oppression, power, and privilege are infused into each system and impact people's development (Lockhart, 2021; Roy, 2018). To examine an individual's experience, a core understanding is needed of how various systems of oppression reinforce subjugation and inferiority for people whose social identities are not white, male, affluent, heterosexual, Christian, or able-bodied. While Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory provides a foundation for analyzing the functionality of the systems for the individual and the individual's experiences with the systems, the works of post-structural feminism offer an opportunity for a person to be informed about the interlocking systems of oppression and to examine how they are perpetuated in multiple systems of society (Lockhart, 2021; Nadan et al., 2015; Roberts, 2023).

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems are discussed throughout the course. This theory helps pre-service teachers to understand and identify entities that are risk or protective factors for children. Bronfenbrenner's work is integrated into an assignment that involves analyzing a case

Conceptualizing Child Abuse Advocacy

study that focuses on a community's response to the maltreatment of six immigrant children. The course module for this course included the following materials to complete the assignment: (a) the Maryland Child Protection Act statute; (b) an article on the four types of parenting; (c) literature by bell hooks; (d) a video of a panel that addressed abuse and violence in intimate partnerships and between parents and children; and (e) a lecture recording on child maltreatment and mandated reporting.

The purpose of including these resources in the module is to help pre-service teachers detect authoritarian or uninvolved parenting styles, describe how specific parenting styles impact a child's development, and be informed about the role and responsibilities of mandated reporters as advocates for children. This task also offers pre-service teachers an opportunity to examine the effectiveness of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory when barriers and unjust practices are perpetuated by people recognized in society as responsible for providing safety and security for children and youth. Post-structural feminism is a branch of feminist theory that challenges and critiques contemporary discourses about social identities in society (Maclaran & Stevens, 2018; Perez et al., 2016). Post-structural feminism challenges the idea of framing a person's social identity as binary, standardized, and inherently fixed. Instead, post-structural feminism acknowledges the power of discourses to contextualize people's experiences based on their multiple social identities. It examines how language and social discourses influence the power relations of men, women, and children (Collins, 2022; hooks, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Perez et al., 2016; Roberts, 2022).

Post-structural feminist, bell hooks², pushed feminist scholars to examine and problematize the difference in society's response to violence when perpetuated by men to harm girls and women rather than women to harm men and children. Hooks (2001) contested the longstanding societal myth that domination

and love can coexist. She further mentioned how dominating behaviors such as withholding information, corporal punishment, abuse, and lying diminish the possibilities of a person developing authentically and establishing and sustaining authentic, meaningful, and loving relationships with other people (hooks, 2001). Intersectionality and the works of Black feminism, specifically the concept of the matrix of domination, contribute to bell hooks' work by addressing how the nuances of cultural factors and various forms of oppression play a role in understanding how children's bodies are constantly surveilled and subjugated by family members, educators, public servants, and other adults in the community (Perez et al., 2016; Roberts, 2023). The subjugation of children's bodies in school spaces occurs in classroom management, specifically when it involves meeting the teacher's expectations regarding the length of time a child must remain seated and demonstrate on-task behavior. For example, depending on the grade level, children as young as five are often expected to remain seated for extended periods—whether to complete academic-related assignments, high stakes standardized tests, or during breakfast and lunch periods in the cafeteria. Scholars have noted how schools that are situated in specific residential segregated communities tend to experience surveillance and restricted schedules that limit opportunities for children to engage in movement, creativity, and interactions with peers and express themselves (Valenzuela, 2010).

Post-structural feminism understands that child abuse occurs due to the inaccessibility of resources and support systems. Intersectionality rejects the notion that race, gender, or class independently determines the outcome of experiences for an individual. Rather, intersectionality theorizes how multiple identities, such as race, gender, class, socioeconomic status, ability, sexual orientation, age, residential community, and so forth, simultaneously influence a person's experience through systems of bias and inequities. Black feminist scholar Dorothy Roberts (2023) utilized the matrix of domination lens

2 Bell hooks's name is in lowercase letters to center the scholarship of her work (NewsOneStaff, 2022).

to highlight how child welfare agencies primarily target Black residential communities. Roberts (2023) stated that due to racist, capitalist, and patriarchal policies, many children in the U.S. experience inadequate housing, nutrition, health care, education, and childcare, which child protection agencies overlook when it comes to investigating families for child abuse and neglect.

Bell hooks addressed parenting in multiple early works (2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2004). She evoked her personal and brother's experiences with abuse from her father when they were children. The abuse they experienced restricted them from displaying emotions, led them to withdraw from engagement in playful behaviors that did not align with the ideals of heteropatriarchy, and generated confusion about the meaning of love in the household. She developed two theoretical constructs underlying liberated parenting: revolutionary parenting and feminist parenting. Both forms of parenting support the child's right to receive love, respect, and responsive care. These theoretical constructs also utilize an anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist approach to humanize and prioritize family members' concerns, feelings, and well-being (Hooper & Muzeta, 2025).

For revolutionary parenting, hooks argued that a woman's identity and familial identity as a biological mother do not immediately grant her the ability to be sufficiently prepared to be a parent, raise, and provide care for the child. Revolutionary parenting urges people to conceptualize how men can equally participate in the roles and responsibilities of parenting and child-rearing. Hooks (2000b) asserted that terms such as "tenderness" and "affection" are commonly associated with motherhood rather than fatherhood (p. 137). She further stated that regardless of a person's gender and marital status, the child-rearing process is not only exclusive to adults or women who have children. Revolutionary parenting is driven by the belief that it takes a village to raise a child. It is a communal methodology that leans on the participation of the community of people, including immediate or extended family members, neighbors, community-based childcare staff and educators, or educators at local schools, to

raise a child (Hooper & Muzeta, 2025). This practice informs the child that they are loved by people in the community. It also creates an opportunity for the child to develop relationships with more than one person as their caregiver and be informed that more than one individual can be contacted and depended on to obtain love, safety, and security.

For feminist parenting, hooks addressed the importance of raising both boys and girls in gender-inclusive, anti-hierarchical, and gender-non-conforming spaces and allowing children to engage in exploration. Regardless of the gender of the parent and child, hooks (2000a) explained the role that mothers and fathers play in upholding and practicing sexism and patriarchy in parenting. She argued that parents who perpetuate these oppressive conditions in the household adopt an authoritarian or autocratic approach to parenting, which dismisses children's civil rights. In this context, hooks called out the discrepancies between the society and feminist responses when the abuser of children is a mother or adult female rather than a male.

The pre-service teachers were assigned the following book chapters to review: "Justice: Childhood Love Lessons" from the book *All About Love* (hooks, 2001) and "Feminist Parenting" from the book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (hooks, 2000b). Reviewing these works allows the pre-service teachers to learn about the rights, humanity, and degree of autonomy children are granted in society. Through these works, they also examine and critique structures and systems that reinforce parental or caregiver domination while silencing and traumatizing children. One theme is the need to question and challenge adult behaviors that dominate children. Hooks' collective works urge parents and families to challenge sexism and patriarchy to set the foundation for children to experience meaningful love, safety, emotions, and the liberation of their bodies (hooks, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2004). Bell hooks advocated for the home being a place of origin for cultivating love and community (hooks, 2001). A family that upholds beliefs and behavioral practices rooted in hierarchy, marginalization, and oppression within the home will likely perpetuate these

Conceptualizing Child Abuse Advocacy

ideologies by projecting them onto individuals they perceive as inferior in the broader society (hooks, 2001).

The pre-service teachers were also asked to watch a video that premiered on MSNBC in 2014 and featured Melissa Harris-Perry, as the host, Stacey Patton, Bomani Jones, Camelo Ortiz, and Rev. Dr. Jackie Lewis. This panel discussed the connection between domestic violence and child abuse and society's failure to respond to family violence by NFL football players specifically, Ray Rice's domestic violence and Adrian Peterson's child abuse scandal (Melissa Harris-Perry Show, 2014). The panel also discussed how the photographs of bruises and marks on Adrian Peterson's son's body sparked societal outrage. This video exposed how corporal punishment has been a widely accepted parenting practice. This parenting practice is enforced on the most vulnerable persons (children) in society to rationalize producing outcomes that are desirable and satisfactory for the parent.

The pre-service teachers were also instructed to watch a local news video that features an upper-middle-class white woman who was arrested for abusing her six children adopted from Latin American countries. Although the news reporter explained that the children confided in their friends' parents, neighbors, local police, and fire department, the mother was not arrested until years later, despite 65 incidents of neglect and suspected abuse reported to the police. After reviewing the assigned readings and video, the pre-service teachers were asked to utilize bell hooks' and Bronfenbrenner's standpoints to question, critique, and raise concerns about the inadequacy of systems with respect to individual and community care and responsibility. They were asked to examine the reporting of the incident that they witnessed in the video, explain and critique the roles and responsibilities of people in the community, and interpret and critique the interactions and relationships the children had with education leaders, educators, friends, neighbors, and community stakeholders. This multi-tiered activity was presented on a discussion board in the institution's learning

management system. The pre-service teachers were encouraged to choose one of the systems from the bioecological framework to critique. To ensure that the discussion board activity was informative and engaging, the pre-service teachers were required to view, comment, and pose questions on their peers' discussion board posts. Moreover, they were asked to visualize themselves as being a part of the community and to conceptualize their role as prioritizing rights and safety for the adopted children.

The pre-service teachers were encouraged to describe how the children's interactions in the community impacted their lived experiences and development on the microsystem, exosystem, and mesosystem levels of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework. Students primarily expressed disbelief at the location and proximity of sites (i.e., the school, police precinct, and residential community district) where the abuse occurred. In particular, a few pre-service teachers initially acknowledged their familiarity with the neighborhood where the abuse occurred and observed that criminal activity there is minimal compared to other neighborhoods in the District of Columbia metropolitan area. It is important to note that the location where the abuse occurred was a predominantly white and affluent neighborhood. Research has found that the composition of a neighborhood influences people's perceptions of safety and violence, as well as their views on wealth and poverty within different communities (Merritt, 2020; Nadan et al., 2015; Roberts, 2022). In the book *Torn Apart*, Roberts (2022) pointed out that Black families living in segregated, low-income communities are subjected to hyper-surveillance of their parenting practices and face disproportionately high rates of reports of child maltreatment and involvement with child welfare services. This assertion illustrates that mandated reporters and CPS representatives may hold biases based on a family's race, ethnic, and socioeconomic background. These biases can influence mandated reporters' and CPS representatives' judgments about what constitutes appropriate or harmful parenting (Merritt, 2020; Roberts, 2022).

This activity generated a variety of responses from the pre-service teachers. A few pre-service teachers questioned why the foster mom chose to adopt the children. Several pre-service teachers also expressed disbelief and disappointment in the neighbor's and police officers' responses to the children who conveyed their experiences of abuse. As there were so many abuse incidents, the pre-service teachers concluded that evidence of maltreatment warranted a response from the teachers. One pre-service teacher particularly connected the case to the assigned reading of the Maryland Child Protection Act and raised questions about the legal consequences for teachers, police officers, first responders, and social workers. This assignment also provoked a few pre-service teachers to discuss their personal experiences of child abuse or reporting a child abuse case when it occurred at a school. Several pre-service teachers pointed out the multiple traumatic experiences the adopted children faced from being separated from their biological families, abused by an adopted mother, or ignored by the community. The pre-service teachers directly made connections to the bell hooks readings and to the video and pointed out how race, gender, class, and nationality allowed the children of color to be abused by an affluent white woman and ignored for years.

As a course instructor, I believe the course materials were important to shed light on the gaps in research and practice opportunities for advocates to respond to and challenge violence against children, especially when the abusers are mothers, grandmothers, aunts, or guardians. Challenging male domination toward women and children has been normalized in society to counter sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy. However, gender assumptions about mothers being more equipped for childrearing and caregiving are rarely questioned or critically examined, which reinforces sexism and domination in parenting roles (hooks, 2001; Hooper & Muzeta, 2025). Furthermore, the role, responsibilities, and societal meaning of the term "adult," particularly in relation to caregiving, family members, and the authority held over children, reinforce systems of subjugation,

sexism, and patriarchy by positioning children and adolescents as powerless beings who must only be controlled by adults (hooks, 2001; Perez et al., 2016).

Knowledge About Children's Rights in Teacher Education and P-12 Education

Children's rights are recognized as human rights (Correia et al., 2019; De Graeve, 2015; Faiz & Kamer, 2017; hooks, 2000b, 2001; Perez et al., 2016). Exercising children's rights acknowledges their autonomy and sufficiency to participate and make decisions in society. In teacher education, hyper-surveillance of children and youth under the guise of classroom management or protection in and beyond school settings impacts children's youth and autonomy. Correia et al. (2019) contributed to this notion by arguing about how the quality of education and care must examine traditional gender roles and the adult-child power dynamics that exist in P-12 schools and how they impact children's and adolescents' voices, participation, conceptions of their protection, and perspectives on how to contribute to society. However, P-12 schools do not explicitly teach children about their rights in society. Perez et al. (2016) noted how ideologies and practices embedded in both the hidden and explicit curriculum contribute to the subjugation and normalization of hegemony in early childhood learning environments. Young children's bodies are continuously regulated and controlled through restrictions in classroom spaces, scripted curricula, structured routines, and authoritarian teaching styles. In addition, Patton (2017) sheds light on how physical and verbal harm directed to children reinforce systems of dominance rooted in age, class, race, and gender, which silence and oppress children and youth. She asserted that "humiliating or inflicting pain onto your child's body is a social experience that reinforces society's oppressive power structures" (Patton, 2017, p. 15). Supporting this perspective, Perez et al. (2016) highlighted how children remain consistently vulnerable within the legal system, facing significant barriers to justice

Conceptualizing Child Abuse Advocacy

and protection due to the lack of accessible, explicit information about their rights and the absence of community-based resources that prioritize children's needs.

The topic of children's rights is grounded in works from a collection of theories—post-structuralism, feminism, and decolonization. These theories point out the legitimate ways children and youth are equipped to be active agents in contributing to and transforming society (De Graeve, 2015; Dekel et al., 2019; hooks, 2001, 2004). The bodies of these theories acknowledge that patriarchy and sexism can co-exist in child-rearing practices for dual and single-parent households, which leads to children perpetuating gender binary behaviors (hooks, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2004). In particular, post-structural feminist scholars have traditionally utilized their epistemologies, methodologies, and pedagogies of love and care in their work to point out and reject the domination, objectification, commodification, and exploitation that dehumanizes women, men, and children (Collins, 2022; hooks, 2000a, 2000b).

Research and policy reports on children's rights have been explored in multiple disciplines, specifically focusing on early childhood and international education (Correia et al., 2019; Faiz & Kamer, 2017). In 1989, the United Nations Convention on Rights for Children provided a comprehensive legal document spelling out children's rights in society (Correia et al., 2019). This document has been critiqued because of the lack of research and policies on children's rights that consider how the experiences and interactions shaped by children's social identities can influence their human development (De Graeve, 2015). When children experience discrimination based on their social identities they experience trauma and stress, which negatively impacts their physical and mental health (Hillard et al., 2021).

Policies embedded in the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, the Individual with Disabilities Act, Title I, and inclusion education are frequently discussed in teacher education courses to address the right of children to receive free and good quality

education. However, teachings of children's rights to safety, protection, and autonomy remain scarce in the teacher education and P-12 education discourse (Faiz & Kamer, 2017). To communicate the priority of children's safety, protection, well-being, needs, and interests in society, Boutte and Bryan's work (2021) referred to a traditional greeting practiced by the Masai tribe—*Kasserian Ingera*, which means "And how are the children?" (p. 233). In their work, they asked what would happen if federal and state government officials began their public appearances by asking and seeking answers from the public to the question, "How are the children?" Boutte and Bryan (2021) suggested that adopting this type of practice in the United States would raise consciousness of the treatment of certain demographic categories of children and promote recognition of the longstanding institutional and systemic disparities placed upon marginalized communities that impact their well-being. Faiz and Kamer (2017) further argued that it is moral and ethical for children and youth to be informed about their rights on legal and medical documents that impact their well-being.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Because teacher education programs prepare future teachers to be mandated reporters and supporters, it is imperative that teacher education programs center the teaching of children's rights from a historical and contemporary global and feminist standpoint on human rights and social justice, communicate the idea of social and moral responsibility in advocating for children, and provide knowledge about legal regulations for children's safety and rights beyond the education context (Faiz, 2017). Although it is important for teacher education program faculty to inform pre-service teachers on how to access state and federal legislation for mandated reporting, it is equally important for them to inform pre-service teachers about disproportionate mandated reporting based on race and class communities and how that has traditionally impacted Black families (Major, 2018; Roberts, 2023). Pre-service teachers need to be given the opportunity to learn about ways of working with community organizations to provide

resources to students and families to prevent child abuse and neglect. Preventing violence and abuse against children warrants a commitment from adults to be informed about healthy and effective caregiving practices, relevant and meaningful parenting resources, and the importance of respecting children's rights. This type of work strengthens the interactions and relationships between children and adults. It also involves adults acknowledging the inherent power imbalances and dynamics of domination that often exist in adult-child relationships. Schools can serve as a resource for preventing child abuse by collaborating with local community organizations to offer workshops, classes, and programs that educate caregivers and parents. These initiatives should focus on the various ways that physical and verbal punishment can harm a child's emotional, psychological, and cognitive development (Patton, 2017). Patton (2017) described the work of a Wisconsin district attorney in 2014, who partnered with leaders from local organizations to provide a program that educated parents on alternative discipline practices that do not involve violence. This program decreased the number of CPS investigations for parents of color. The model for this program actively dismantles CPS practices that resemble criminalization, including the policing, surveillance, and separation of families.

Schools and local community-based programs should work together to provide workshops or coaching sessions for parents, adult family members, and children to engage in restorative practice dialogues. These workshops should initially ask parents to respond to the following questions:

- What type of parent do I want to be for my child? Why?
- What child-rearing practices do I notice that make my child feel safe, loved, sad, or angry?
- What external factors negatively impact my parenting? When and how often?

These questions help parents recognize their behavior patterns and acknowledge stressors and how they impact their interactions with children and

family members. A restorative practice dialogue, particularly between the parent(s) and child, calls for the parent to adopt a post-structural feminist lens, practice empathy, and value their child's perspective. The parent must focus their attention on the child, actively listen without interruption or blame, and recognize the child's strengths. Questions and phrases that can be posed to generate a dialogue include:

- What happened?
- I feel...when you do...; and
- How did the (specific action) make you feel?

Restorative dialogues through a post-structural feminism framework allow the child to ask their parent(s) questions and express their feelings verbally or through writing or drawings.

It is worth recognizing that the cultural traditions, remedies, and child-rearing practices of certain demographic communities can significantly influence how education personnel perceive abuse. For example, immigrant families who recently relocated to the United States are subjected to judgment by educators and school personnel if they do not adopt the child-rearing practices that reflect white middle-class Americans. While this topic can be controversial, especially when intersecting with traditional gender roles or culturally specific practices such as arranged marriages between an adolescent and an adult, it is essential for educators and school personnel to be informed about the cultural contexts and remedies practiced by the students and families they serve. Cultural remedies such as cupping, which leaves marks on the skin, are commonly practiced in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Mexico to increase blood circulation. To sustain trust and have empathy and understanding, educators and school personnel must learn how cultural remedy practices preserve the child's safety and cultural identity rather than instill harm (Chen, 2019). Classroom and school spaces must be supportive environments that are free from judgment and stigma for children who are victims to disclose any symptoms of harm they perceive or experience. At

Conceptualizing Child Abuse Advocacy

the beginning of the academic year, schools should invite professionals who are traditional healers, herbalists, or acupuncturists as guest speakers to inform educators and administrators about the history of cultural remedy practices for specific diverse communities, the purpose of various cultural remedies, and how they affect children's bodies. Being informed about these cultural remedy practices can help teachers gain cultural awareness.

Pre-service and in-service teachers can use children's books as a vehicle to teach children about the rights to be informed about consent, be cared for by caregivers, parents, or adults, and be safe, happy, and healthy in any environment. Books about consent, such as *Where Hands Go?: An Introduction to Safe and Unsafe Touch* (Diggs, 2021), *The ABC's of Consent* (Diggs, 2022), *Want a Hug: Consent and Boundaries for Children* (Babinec & Mineker, 2022), and *Body Boundaries Make Me Stronger* (Cole, 2022), can help validate children's feelings and voices on uncomfortable experiences with children and adults. Allowing children to engage in meaningful discussions and activities related to social and emotional learning deepens their understanding of themselves and promotes informed and confident decision-making. It also empowers them with a sense of agency. These experiences encourage children to apply what they have learned within the school environment and in their everyday lives. Teaching children about their rights strengthens cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as accessibility to imagination and exploration and awareness of different cultural backgrounds.

This article highlights the importance of pre-service teachers being prepared to recognize and advocate for children when they experience abuse and neglect. Deliveli's (2023) research shows that teacher candidates were able to define child abuse and be empathetic to children who experienced abuse. However, Deliveli's (2023) research warrants critique, as the topics of race, gender, and class of the children were absent. This underscores the importance of examining differences in teacher

candidates' levels of empathy for children of color and white children who are victims of child abuse. Research has consistently shown how systemic racism shapes an individual's belief, which leads to stereotypes and biases that, for example, perceive Black children and children of color as adults and less vulnerable compared to their white counterparts (Boutte & Bryan, 2021). It would be interesting to examine whether pre-service teachers' empathy is greater if they share the same race and gender identity as the abuser and children/youth. Teacher education programs should delve into the meaning of trauma in depth and integrate teachings on trauma-informed interventions into their coursework (Rahimi et al., 2021). Scholars found that teachers lacked knowledge about the various causes and indicators of trauma their students experienced (Major, 2018; Rahimi et al., 2021).

Major (2018) stated that the meaning of trauma in teacher education discourse is typically driven through the lens of child protection and welfare framework. Major (2018) particularly pointed out that "educational definitions of trauma are produced through whiteness to ignore the historical and collective harm that disproportionately harms particular groups, recognizing trauma only when it has been monitored as occurring in the home" (p. 203). This perspective leads future teachers to monitor and report signs of child maltreatment that directly come from the home setting (p. 203). In response to this perspective, teacher educators can create a multi-layered assignment that involves pre-service teachers in constructing their meaning of trauma, healing, and safe environments. Following this assignment, pre-service teachers should be encouraged to complete an implicit association test survey to determine and discuss any biases they hold and how that can influence decision-making as it pertains to parenting and mandated reporting. Teacher educators should pose the following questions to pre-service teachers to encourage them to engage in self-reflection:

(a) In what ways do my assumptions about race, class, and gender reinforce isolation and disparities

as it pertains to my interactions with families and students?

(b) How do I communicate to my colleagues about students and their families whose racial, socioeconomic, gender, language, religion, or nationality differs from mine?

Discussing topics of race, racism, and other forms of oppression often leads students displaying resistance and emotions that signal discomfort (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Matias, 2014; Matias et al., 2016). Prominent anti-racist scholars acknowledge that there are multiple pedagogical practices and resources that can be used to teach and engage college students in critical praxis, productive conversations about race, racism, and other forms of oppression, and action to change inequity (Madkins & Nazar, 2022; Major, 2018; Matias & Boucher, 2023). Maximizing students' engagement in social justice topics involves the teacher educator co-planning with students to establish an agreement on ways to communicate with each other. Before engaging in these topics, it is also important that there is a universal understanding of terms or phrases such as racial and multicultural literacy, antidiscrimination, and human rights for all. Understanding these terms can reinforce the purpose and goal of the conversation as it pertains to advocacy and education (Madkins & Nazar, 2022).

Next, teacher educators should encourage pre-service teachers to watch television series such as *Them* (Waithe & Marvin, 2021) or the documentary *Never Give Up: A Complex Trauma Film by Youth for Youth* (Spinazolla et al., 2017) to learn about the children's and adolescents' experiences of trauma, their behaviors in responding to traumatic experiences in various spaces, their coping practices, and their perspectives of safe environments. The pre-service teachers can compare their initial understandings to their notes from watching either film to identify any gaps in various cultures' experiences and their perception of the meaning of trauma. They can gain awareness of how communities of color have negative experiences with public service assistance systems such as the police,

health care providers, and school systems (Boutte & Bryan, 2021; Major, 2018) and how various communities have developed coping practices and safe environments. It is important that teacher education courses equip pre-service teachers with knowledge about various local resources that are available to families. There needs to be an increase in community schooling and wraparound services to ensure that children's physical, emotional, social, and educational needs are addressed and to reduce burnout among teachers due to handling children's trauma cases.

Humanizing the healing process is essential and challenges the perception of strength that is rooted in whiteness and patriarchy. Placing the responsibility on the individual to recover or develop resilience within a specific timeframe following traumatic events discounts the complexities of trauma recovery (Major, 2018). Therefore, teacher education and P-12 schools should also consistently provide cultural affinity support groups (e.g., Parents of Color) throughout the academic year for parents, families, educators, children, and youth. Because pre-service teachers and in-service teachers are typically the primary professionals to learn about their students' traumatic experiences, it is important that teacher educators inform them that they may experience secondary traumatic symptoms such as avoidance or isolation, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, despair, or frequent mood changes (Davis et al., 2022). Thus, it is crucial that faculty and administrators in teacher education programs and P-12 school administrators provide information to access internal or external support systems that are culturally competent and responsive in providing mental and emotional support based on the educators' social identities (Davis et al., 2022). This perspective is particularly important for Black pre-service and in-service teachers, as racism in society has utilized tropes to permit social service systems to disregard their voices and experiences of pain, grief, and trauma.

This article highlighted the importance of integrating post-structural feminist theory into teacher education courses and emphasized the need to

Conceptualizing Child Abuse Advocacy

inspire future educators to critically reflect on how their actions can contribute to cultivating a moral, anti-bias, and socially just society. The analysis using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and post-structural feminism brings relevancy to the practicality of examining human development for children and adolescents. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory examines how contexts and interactions shape experiences and development, while post-structural feminism acknowledges how

power, oppression, and privilege shape people's experiences. Post-structural feminism is a self-reflective approach for pre-service teachers. This theoretical paradigm enables pre-service teachers to advocate for children who experience maltreatment and recognize how the positioning of their social identities in society can either perpetuate or challenge harm against marginalized and vulnerable communities. ■

Author Bio



Dr. Leta Hooper is an assistant professor and coordinator of the Early Childhood Special Education Program at Bowie State University. Her research interests focus on examining how institution's policies, practices, and curriculum impact Black pre-service, novice, and experienced educators' personal and professional identities, feminism, and critical pedagogy in teacher education.

References

- Babinec, C. & Mineker, V. (2022). *Want a hug: Consent and boundaries for kids*. Familius.
- Boutte, G., & Bryan, N. (2021). When will Black children be well? Interrupting anti-Black violence in early childhood classrooms and schools. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 22(3), 232–243. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491198905>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1995). The bioecological model from a life course perspective: Reflections of a participant observer. In P. Moen, G.H. Elder, Jr., & K. Lüscher (Eds.), *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development* (pp. 599–618). American Psychological Association. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/10176-017>
- Chandler-Cole, C. (2024). *From mandated reporter to community supporter: Reimagining schools as the nexus to address intersectional social justice*. [Doctoral dissertation, Loyola Marymount University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses..
- Chen, L. (2019). Cultural competency in mandated reporting among healthcare professionals. *Southern California Review of Law & Social Justice*, 28, 319–346. <https://gould.usc.edu/students/journals/rlsj/issues/assets/docs/volume28/Spring2019/2-3-chen.pdf>
- Children's Bureau. (2024). Child Maltreatment 2022. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. <https://acf.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2022>

Conceptualizing Child Abuse Advocacy

- Cole, E. (2022). *Body boundaries make me stronger*. Go2PublishLLC.
- Collins, P. H. (2022). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (30th anniversary ed.). Routledge.
- Cornell, L. C., & Verlenden, J. V. (2020). A child rights framework for educational system reform. In B. K. Nastasi, S. N. Hart, & S. C. Naser (Eds.), *International handbook on child rights and school psychology* (pp. 97–113). Springer Nature.
- Correia, N., Camilo, C., Aguiar, C., & Amaro, F. (2019). Children's right to participate in early childhood education settings: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 100, 76–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.02.031>
- Davis, W., Petrovic, L., Whalen, K., Danna, L., Zeigler, K., Brewton, A., Joseph, M., Baker, C., Overstreet, S., & the New Orleans Trauma-Informed Learning Collaborative. (2022). Centering trauma-informed approaches in schools within a social justice framework. *Psychology in the Schools*, 59(12), 2453–2470. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22664>
- De Graeve, K. (2015). Children's rights from a gender studies perspective: Gender, intersectionality and the ethics of care. In W. Vandenhoe, E. Desmet, D. Reynaert and S. Lembrechts (Eds.). *Routledge international handbook children's rights studies* (pp.147–160). Routledge.
- Dekel, B., Abrahams, N., & Andipatin, M. (2019). Exploring the intersection between violence against women and children from the perspective of parents convicted of child homicide. *Journal of family violence*, 34(1), 9–20.
- Deliveli, K. (2023). An emphatic perspective: How do pre-school and classroom teacher candidates interpret child abuse and neglect? *Journal of Qualitative Research in Education*, (34), 114–147. <https://doi.org/10.14689/enad.34.1560>
- Diggs, K. S. (2021). *Where hands go: An introduction to safe and unsafe youch*. Diggs Publishing LLC.
- Diggs, K. S. (2022). *The ABCs of consent*. Diggs Publishing LLC.
- Dinehart, L., & Kenny, M. C. (2015). Knowledge of child abuse and reporting practices among early care and education providers. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 29(4), 429–443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2015.1073818>.
- Faiz, M. & Kamer, S. T. (2017). Prospective teachers' opinions concerning children's rights. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 6(3), 118–128. <http://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v6n3p118>.
- Hilliard, L. J., Attaya, M. K., & Millben, M. (2021). Talking to children about race, gender, and social issues: Review and recommendations. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 8(2), 167–174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23727322211033876>
- Hooks, B. (2001). *All about love*. New Visions.
- Hooks, B.(2000a). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. Pluto Press.
- Hooks, B.(2000b). *Feminist theory: From margin to center* (2nd ed.). South End Press
- Hooks, B.(2004). *The will to change: Men, masculinity, and love*. Washington Square Press

Conceptualizing Child Abuse Advocacy

- Hooper, L., & Muzeta, B. (2025). Using Queen Sugar as a lens to counter hegemonic conceptions of black fathers' involvement in P-12 Schools. *Journal of Family Diversity in Education*, 6(2), 149–170. <https://doi.org/10.53956/jfde.2024.197>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1996). Silences as weapons: Challenges of a Black professor teaching White students. *Theory into practice*, 35(2), 79–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849609543706>
- Lockhart, J. (2021). *Excerpts from silence—Radical critical feminism and adolescent girls' social emotional development: A case study of Red River middle school*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Denver]. Electronic Theses and Dissertations. <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2944&context=etd>
- Maclaran, P., & Stevens, L. (2018). Thinking through feminist theorizing: Poststructuralist feminism, ecofeminism and intersectionality. In S. Dobscha. (Ed.), *Handbook of research on gender and marketing* (pp. 229–251), Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Madkins, T. C., & Nazar, C. R. (2022). Theoretical perspectives for developing antiracist teaching dispositions and practices in preservice teacher education. *Science Education*, 106(5), 1118–1134. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21757>
- Major, C. (2018). Whitewashing trauma: Applying neoliberalism, governmentality, and whiteness theory to trauma training for teachers. *Whiteness and Education*, 3(2), 198–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2019.1573643>
- Matias, C. E., & Boucher, C. (2023). From critical whiteness studies to a critical study of whiteness: Restoring criticality in critical whiteness studies. *Whiteness and Education*, 8(1), 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2021.1993751>
- Matias, C. (2020). Do you see the words coming out of that text?: Seeing whiteness in digital text. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 22(2), 14–29. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v22i2.2411>
- Matias, C. E. (2014). And our feelings just don't feel it anymore": Re-feeling whiteness, resistance, and emotionality. *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege*, 4(2), 134–153. <https://wpcjournal.com/article/view/12176>
- Matias, C. E., Montoya, R., & Nishi, N. W. (2016). Blocking CRT: How the emotionality of whiteness blocks CRT in urban teacher education. *Educational Studies*, 52(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2015.1120205>
- Mawhinney, L., Mulero, L., & Perez, C. (2012). African American pre-service teachers' perspectives on urban education: An exploration at an HBCU. *Urban Review*, 44(4), 612–627.
- Melissa Harris-Perry Show. (2014, September 21). *Dr. Patton on the Melissa Harris-Perry Show* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Z7kO6swdsvo?si=Zd0Eymb50FR52yp4>
- Merritt, D. H. (2020). How do families experience and interact with CPS?. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 692(1), 203–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716220979520>
- Myers, V. (2023, June 28). *When mandated reporting does more than good: Tools for a new approach*. Education Healthcare Public Services. <https://www.aft.org/news/when-mandated-reporting-does-more-harm-good-tools-new-approach>
- Nadan, Y., Spilsbury, J. C., & Korbin, J. E. (2015). Culture and context in understanding child maltreatment: Contributions of intersectionality and neighborhood-based research. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 41, 40–48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.10.021>

Conceptualizing Child Abuse Advocacy

- NewsOne Staff (2022, September 25). Here's why bell hooks used lowercase letters for her name. <https://madamenoire.com/1304060/heres-why-bell-hooks-used-lowercase-letters-for-her-name/>.
- Patton, S. (2017). *Spare the kids: Why whupping children won't save black America*. Beacon Press.
- Perez, M. S., Medellin, K., Rideaux, K. S. (2016). Repositioning childhood lived experiences within adult contexts: A Black feminist analysis of childhood/s regulation in early childhood care and education. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 6(1), 67–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610616631132>
- Rahimi, R., Liston, D., Adkins, A., & Nourzad, J. (2021). Teacher awareness of trauma informed practice: Raising awareness in Southeast Georgia. *Georgia Educational Researcher*, 18 (2), 70–88. <https://doi.org/10.20429/ger.2021.180204>
- Rapoport, E., Reisert, H., Schoeman, E., & Adesman, A. (2020). Reporting of child maltreatment during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in New York City. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 116, 104719. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104719>.
- Roberts, D. (2022). *Torn apart: How the child welfare system destroys Black families—and how abolition can build a safer world*. Basic Books.
- Roberts, D. (2023). Why abolition. *Family Court Review*, 61(2), 229–241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12712>.
- Rodriguez, C. M., Lee, S. J., & Ward, K. P. (2021). Underlying mechanisms for racial disparities in parent-child physical and psychological aggression and child abuse risk. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 117, 105089. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105089>.
- Roy, A. L. (2018). Intersectional ecologies: Positioning intersectionality in settings-level research. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, (161), 57–74. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20248>.
- Spinazolla, J., Habib, M., Kisiel, C. & Blackshear, K. (Executive Producers). (2017). *Never give up: A complex trauma film by youth for youth* [Film]. National Child Traumatic Stress Network; Digital Bodega
- Valenzuela, A. (2010). *Subtractive schooling: US-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Suny Press.
- Waithe, L. & Marvin, L. (Executive Producers). (2021–2024). *Them* [TV series]. Amazon Studio; Sony Pictures Television.