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Challenging Whiteness at Claremont High School

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Abstract

Ebony Wright was slated to graduate from Claremont High School in the spring. She was on the honor roll, captain of the girls' varsity softball and swim teams, and recently awarded an academic scholarship to attend a highly ranked university in the fall. Ebony was a "model" student. How she found herself sitting in the principal's office several weeks before graduation was a shock to everyone. This case study challenges the function of whiteness in school policies. Aspiring school and teacher leaders are provided with the opportunity to consider the impact of a seemingly race-neutral school dress code policy.

Keywords

Black girls, school policies, whiteness, dress code policy

On August 20, 2018, school officials in Louisiana escorted a tearful 11-year-old Black girl from her sixth-grade classroom. She was asked to leave the private Roman Catholic school because her braided hair, which included hair extensions, did not align with the school's dress code policy. Several classmates recorded the incident and it soon went viral on multiple social media platforms sparking outrage throughout the school, the surrounding community, and the nation (Jacobs & Levin, 2018). Unfortunately, this narrative is not an anomaly. Black girls are consistently disciplined in schools for the distinct ways they wear and style their hair (Miles Nash & Watson, in press). Many dress code policies, while seemingly race-neutral, are racially biased as they are centered in whiteness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Whiteness is grounded

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in White middle-class cultural norms and standards and is antithetical to Black girls and Black girlhood (Watson, 2018a). Importantly, as the nation's public schools continue to become more racially and ethnically diverse (Welsh & Swain, 2020), colleges of education must prepare school and teacher leaders to address school policies and practices that unjustly affect the schooling experiences of children of Color in general, and Black girls in particular (Miles Nash & Watson, in press).

Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to equip aspiring school and teacher leaders with the tools to understand and address the impact of seemingly race-neutral school dress code policies. The first school dress code law was established in 1969 (see *Tinker vs. Des Moines Independent School District*) and since then many school boards and districts have implemented dress code policies that are intended to encourage what school officials deem "appropriate" dress and behavior. Under this guise, Black girls are disproportionately disciplined in schools (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2016; Watson, 2018b). In 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice along with the Department of Education released a school discipline guidance package (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The toolkit was intended to address race-based discipline disparities in schools and to assist educational agencies in developing practices and policies that create positive and safe learning environments for *all* children. Recently, while the suspension rates have decreased for Black youth throughout the nation, they are still suspended far more frequently than their peers (Kamenetz, 2018). Furthermore, Black girls are disciplined in schools for subjective infractions such as insubordination, aggressive behavior, and dress code violations (Blake et al., 2011; Watson, 2018b). The latter charges were found to promote whiteness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and to marginalize and exclude Black girls from schools and school-related activities (see Battle, 2017; Kaplan, 2013; Klein, 2013; Rivera, 2019).

This case study examines the dress code policy at Claremont High School (CHS). Under the section titled "Pride in Appearance," the mandate, in part, reads:

> If a student's general attire or appearance represents a danger to their health or welfare, or attracts undue attention to the extent that it becomes a disruptive factor either in the classroom or on school grounds, the student will be asked to make necessary changes and/or to leave the classroom or school grounds. Students with repeated infractions will be subject to discipline.

The subjective language of the mandate is challenged when Ebony Wright, an honor roll student and star athlete, is asked to leave her Physics class after her hair was deemed "a distraction" by the teacher. This case study utilizes Critical Race Theory (CRT; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and whiteness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) as frameworks to deconstruct and challenge the inherent bias in CHS's dress code policy.

Case Narrative

CHS

CHS is a Blue Ribbon[1] school located in the Midwest region of the United States. It contains a magnet program and has garnered national acclaim based on the academic achievement of its nearly 1,200 students. While most of CHS's student body resides in the surrounding community, wherein the median household income exceeds $300K, roughly 20% of CHS's students are bussed to the school. Much to their chagrin, they are often referred to as the "bus kids" and are assumed to be eligible for free and reduced breakfast and lunch. CHS's racial demographics are highly celebrated as, based on targeted enrollment, it consists of nearly equal amounts of White, Hispanic, Black, and Asian students. The student–teacher ratio is 17:1. The leadership team has been in place for over 5 years and many stakeholders feel that the school lives up to its mission to "deliver a rigorous and enriching quality education, and prepare all students to thrive as productive members of a democratic pluralistic society."

CHS prides itself on its nationally ranked varsity sports teams, award-winning arts programming, college readiness partnerships with the local university, and student internship opportunities with neighboring businesses and corporations. The average faculty tenure at CHS hovers at 10 years and many tend to stay at the sought-after high school for the majority of their professional careers. Unlike its diverse student body, the demographics of the faculty and staff at CHS are primarily White and female and quite a few teachers live in the surrounding neighborhood. Importantly, CHS's faculty, staff, and administration have maintained strong partnerships with parents and external members of the school community. Many parents, some of whom are professors at the local university, regularly voice their opinions regarding the educational programming and budget expenditure at CHS. They enjoy close and respectful communication with the school's leadership team through the online Parent and Family Engagement Forum (PFEF), booster clubs, and monthly Coffee with Our Principal meetings.

Leadership Matters

Dr. Cynthia Adams is a socially conscious Black woman. Upon graduating with a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she relocated to the Midwest and began working at a tech startup. As an early-career professional, Adams' involvement in the company's STEM mentoring program led her to become interested in and eventually pursue a career shift to science education. She holds a master's degree in science education and a doctorate in educational administration and supervision. She is a graduate of the principal preparation program at the local university and is on a first name basis with many of the faculty. After teaching for 6 years and leading CHS's Math and Science departments for nearly 3 years, Adams was named principal of CHS. She has led the school for the past 5 years and has proven to be an exceptional leader. Under her leadership, CHS has continued to flourish. Last year, 96% of the senior class graduated, and 98% of the graduates went on to

4-year colleges and universities. Dr. Adams' stellar efficacy and well-earned reputation stems from her knowledge base and her ability to see the bigger picture in any given situation. In addition, she mentors local school leaders and often participates in national education conferences.

To date, the only proposed initiative in which the school community has not fully supported Dr. Adams was in her push to institute a uniform dress code policy. While some agreed with her efforts to teach students (and some faculty members) to take pride in their personal appearance and to relieve some of the peer pressure associated with popular styles and clothing, others, including most of the student body, and many influential parents and faculty members, cited the censoring of personal expression in their objection to the proposed policy change. While Dr. Adams conceded, she continues to impress upon CHS students, faculty, and staff the importance of what she calls, "Pride in Presentation." This ideal is mirrored in the school dress code, which details the restrictions and rules by which students and faculty must abide by while in school and at school-sponsored functions. The ostensible notion of "Pride in Presentation" is put to the test when a "model" student is reprimanded for the violation of "unruly proportions" that is naturally growing out of her head.

Race Matters

Ebony Wright's final semester at CHS was going well. In fact, she was having a banner year. The girls' varsity softball team, of which she was the captain, recently cinched the state's title and just a few days ago she was awarded a coveted seat in the Chair's Scholars Program (a full tuition scholarship program that allows eligible students to attend any post-secondary school in the nation almost free of charge). Not surprisingly, Ebony was popular. She was also greatly respected by her peers, teachers, and the administrators at CHS as she was a leader in and out of the classroom. Moreover, as a state champion swimmer and captain of the girls' varsity swim team, Ebony was looking forward to competing in the sport at the collegiate level. As such, she was committed to finishing her last season strong and participated in swim drills Monday through Friday when school was in session and on most weekends. In preparation for the upcoming spring regionals, Ebony often arrived at school by 6 a.m. during the week for swim practice. She would usually arrive before the coach and would typically swim for an hour, leaving her with just enough time to shower, dress, and blow dry her hair before the school day began.

Ebony's diligence was paying off. At the last swim meet she placed first in each of her races and was predicted to dominate the spring regionals. Practices on the Thursdays before swim meets were particularly critical to swimmers because their recorded times dictated the heat in which they would be placed during the competition. On the Thursday before what was to be the last regional finals of her high school career, Ebony went through her usual morning routine. To perform at her best for her recording time, she decided to stay in the pool a little longer and reasoned that she could skip blow-drying her hair and still be on time for her first class of the day. Accordingly, Ebony arrived at her Physics class one min before the tardy bell and

quickly realized that she did not place any gel on her hair, nor did she have a hair tie. She knew that her natural hair would quickly lose its moisture, giving her a new and different look in comparison to her typical straight tresses. Unbothered, Ebony smoothed her wet shoulder-length hair back with her fingers as she confidently sat in her assigned seat. A minute later the bell rang and class began.

As Mrs. Garland, a veteran Physics teacher, took attendance, she occasionally glanced over the classroom. Ending roll call as she had done countless times before, Mrs. Garland called out, "And last, but surely not least, Ebony Wr—OH, my word! Ebony dear, what happened to your hair?" The abrupt and loud inquiry startled the low hum of the classroom causing all movement and quiet conversations to come to a screeching and uncomfortable halt. The words seemed to echo infinitely as Ebony looked up and realized that all eyes were on her. Mrs. Garland broke the deafening silence with a sudden request that sounded more like a loud demand. "Ebony, do you have a hair tie or something you can use to tame your hair? It's literally going all over the place!" Ebony could not believe what she was hearing. She inhaled, paused, and calmly replied, "Mrs. Garland, I just came from swim practice, and I do not have, nor do I need, a hair tie. My hair is drying naturally, without heat." She then nervously ran her fingers through her hair. She felt her natural coils come alive. As Ebony touched her tendrils, she felt herself gaining more confidence and strength in her identity. Her epiphany was interrupted a few minutes later by what felt like yet another jab from Mrs. Garland. "Ebony dear, you're going to have to do something about that stuff on your head. Poor Carter sitting behind you can't see a thing." Ebony felt her heart racing as she recoiled from her teacher's hurtful remarks:

> Mrs. Garland, I do not need to do anything to my hair. And, speaking of Carter, she and everyone else who is on swim team has wet hair, and you have yet to say anything to them about their hair or what they need to do to it.

The rise in Ebony's voice made Mrs. Garland defensive. She yelled, "Ebony, your teammates have beautiful hair!" "Mrs. Garland," Ebony yelled back, "My hair is beautiful, too!" She continued, "Its obviously not beautiful nor acceptable to you and you are bothered by it. Please just leave me and my hair alone!"

Ebony reached for her hair again. This time, she felt her tendrils seemingly speak back to her in a way that added fuel to the fire kindling inside of her. The insults Mrs. Garland hurled her way were intended to douse her spirit. Paradoxically, they did just the opposite. Ebony felt more emboldened as she touched her now almost dry hair—each ringlet seemed to form a crown—poised to protect her as she spoke her truth. Her rising confidence was cut short by Mrs. Garland's shrill demand: "Ebony, I think you need to go to the Principal's Office. My classroom is no place for your defiance and that stuff on your head does not adhere to the 'Pride in Presentation' rule in the student handbook!" As opposed to arguing any further with Mrs. Garland, with whom she generally had a good relationship, Ebony decided to gather her books and water bottle and head to the office. She knew of the recent passing of the CROWN Act and that her parents and Dr. Adams, CHS's Black woman principal, would support her stance. The

handful of Black students in the class silently raised their right fists, an expression of Black pride, as Ebony collected her items preparing to leave the classroom. Mrs. Garland gave final words to usher her out of the door: "I hope you have something reasonable to say for yourself about your behavior and those unruly proportions growing out of your head when you get to Dr. Adams' office." In response, Ebony silently raised her right fist in the air and walked out of the classroom.

The Principal's Office

As Ebony walked to the Principal's Office, she could not help but reflect on all of the emotions she was navigating in the moment. She was embarrassed, yet proud. Angry, yet motivated. She also thought about one of her sheroes, Dr. Angela Davis. Ebony became more emboldened as she thought of the iconic professor and social justice advocate who was unjustly imprisoned and whose natural hair is central to her image. Her mind skipped back to wondering why her Physics teacher would suggest that she was a distraction to the class just for being her full, authentic self. Ebony knew what she had just endured was neither fair nor appropriate. As she entered the main office, one of the few Black women on staff at CHS, Mrs. Brown, complimented her. "Look at that crown, Queen! You are wearing it!" Ebony smiled and explained what just transpired in her Physics class. Mrs. Brown looked concerned as she directed Ebony to the conference room to wait for Dr. Adams.

Ebony sat wondering if she should text her parents to give them a heads up about what was going on. In her nearly 12 years of schooling, this was the first time she was sent out of a classroom. It must be noted that Ebony's father was the outgoing PFEF President and he always supported Dr. Adams' efforts to make CHS an ideal school for students and families. He also advocated for CHS's teachers in meetings with the Claremont School Board and regularly engaged with members of the Claremont City Council to ensure that the school received equitable funding and resources. Ultimately, Ebony decided not to contact her parents because she knew they, and Dr. Adams, would understand the situation and would surely support her wearing of her natural hair. After a few minutes, the conference room door opened. Ebony sat up straight and was prepared to tell her side of the story. Before she could begin, Dr. Adams calmly offered a question that left Ebony flummoxed and despondent: "So, Ms. Wright, I hear you need a hair tie?" For the second time that morning, Ebony simply could not believe her ears. Could Dr. Adams, a Black woman whose daughter, Taylor, was a CHS freshman, be suggesting that Ebony was in the wrong? In a deflated voice, Ebony answered, "Ma'am? I thought you would get it." "Get it? Get what?" Dr. Adams asked.

With tears in her eyes Ebony explained why she felt obligated to defend her right to wear her hair in its natural fashion. Handing her a tissue, Dr. Adams noted,

> Ebony, the only thing I can "get" you is the blow dryer in my desk so you can fix your hair. What I cannot, however, "get" is why you would want to jeopardize all that you have accomplished. Frankly, I'm disappointed that you did not fix your hair before going to class.

Ebony's mouth was visibly agape as she listened to her principal's words unravel all that she thought having a Black woman principal meant. Dr. Adams continued, "Listen, Ebony, I've used chemicals to straighten my hair for years. Look at me. Isn't my hair beautiful? And, I look professional." She continued,

> Girl, listen closely, you're getting ready to go to college where you'll be around more people, different types of people, and you'll be responsible for how you are perceived. You should seriously consider chemically straightening your hair and avoiding these types of confrontations. I know it seems harsh but everything I'm telling you is to prepare you for the real world.

Ebony was perplexed. She wondered if Dr. Adams knew she was perpetuating white supremacy and promoting a reality that would never serve her well. Amid all of the wonderings that were swirling around in Ebony's head, the only response she could muster up was: "But, Dr. Adams, what about your crown?"

The CROWN Act[2]

On July 3, 2019, the governor of California, Gavin Newsom, signed the Create a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural hair (CROWN) Act or Bill SB-188, into law. California is the first state in the nation to prohibit employers and schools from discriminating against individuals based on their hair texture, type, and style. The *CROWN Act* has been heralded as the first of its kind jurisprudence to protect a natural characteristic of people in employment, education, housing, accommodations, and advertising contexts. This unprecedented legislative move to champion identity, particularly that of Black women, has since been passed in New York (SN 6209), New Jersey (SB 3945), Virginia (HB 1514/SB 50), Colorado (HB20-1048), and Washington (SB 2602). In addition, in December 2019, federal legislators Cory Booker (NJ), Sherrod Brown (OH), Cedric L. Richmond (LA), Barbara Lee (CA), Marcia Fudge (OH), and Ayanna Pressley (MA) introduced bills in the Senate and the House of Representatives to support the passing of the *CROWN Act* at the national level. The lawmakers acknowledged that Black children have received messages from schools deeming their hair "disgusting," and other microaggressions based on the fashion of one's hair have become too egregious to ignore. Hence, they are actively working to challenge prejudices "commonly associated with a particular race or national origin" when people wear their hair the way it grows naturally (CROWN Act of 2020, 2020).

Teaching Notes

CRT is founded on the scholarship of Derrick Bell (1930–2011). He was a civil rights activist, legal scholar, and professor. Bell challenged school desegregation efforts, which failed to yield "equal educational opportunities" to Black children (1976) and questioned whether Black America would be better off if we focused on improving the quality of instruction in existing schools, rather than attempting to desegregate the

nation's public schools (1980). And, while Bell believed in the "permanence of racism," he insisted that we must always fight against it. In 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate became the first scholars to theorize race in education research. They suggested that the disparate schooling experiences between White middle-class students and low-income Black and Hispanic students were "logical and predictable" (p. 47) in a racialized society that had yet to come to terms with race and racism. And, as schools are among the first places Black children experience racism (Miles Nash & Watson, in press), aspiring school and teacher leaders must be keenly aware of the impact of seemingly race-neutral school policies as many were found to uphold whiteness (Watson, 2018a).

Whiteness is a social construct that affirms and privileges people who identify as White (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gillborn, 2006). Whiteness is palpable in school policies (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) and is evident in school discipline data. Case in point, 50.7 million children attend U.S. public schools and while Black children make up only 15% of the student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), they are disciplined in schools more often than all other children (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). As stated, Black girls are disproportionately disciplined in schools and many of the infractions are subjective (Blake et al., 2011; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2016; Watson, 2018b). Hence, it remains essential that school and teacher leaders prioritize Black girls' well-being and treat them equitably. Moreover, while efforts have been made to more readily include and support Black girls in schools (Gibbs Grey & Harrison, 2020) and out of school (Mims & Kaler-Jones, 2020), there is still a need for districts and school leaders to develop policies, programs, and accompanying budgets that disrupt current over-disciplining trends (Annamma et al., 2019).

Aspiring and current school and teacher leaders should pay special attention to the biases, assumptions, and insensitivities that are interwoven into school policies, procedures, and curricula. The following discussion questions and extension activities may be used to guide debates, role-playing, and small group discussions as students utilize CRT to deconstruct and challenge whiteness at CHS.

Discussion Questions

1. Examine Dr. Adams' rationale in advising Ebony to chemically straighten her hair. Do you agree or disagree? Why or Why not? What does it promote?
2. In groups of 3 to 4 students, discuss Dr. Adams' response to Ebony. After exploring all that could have informed Dr. Adams' response, present both positions "agreeing" and "disagreeing" with Dr. Adams' advice.
3. In groups of 3 to 4 students, discuss Mrs. Garland's response to Ebony. In particular, address how Mrs. Garland's language upholds whiteness. Next, explain to Mrs. Garland why her response was offensive.
4. Conduct a discourse analysis in which you review the conversations between Ebony and her teacher, principal, and school office staff. Compare the actual and nuanced messages communicated to Ebony based on what each adult said—and what they did not say.

5. What is the function of school dress code policies? What should these policies do? What shouldn't they do?
6. Discuss how frameworks such as intersectional leadership (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020) can inform and influence education practices in ways that champion Black girls.

Extension Activities

1. Why did Ebony assume that Dr. Adams would agree with her stance? Do Black women school leaders matter? Why or Why not?
2. How should Dr. Adams use her cultural capital as a Black woman to improve the schooling experiences of Black girls at CHS? Give at least three examples based on research (national data) centered on Black girls?
3. Review the following online resources and, based on your reading, determine how your district's or school's dress code policy regarding students' hair aligns or does not align with the mandates, guidelines, and policies.
   a. H.R. 5309 CROWN Act of 2020
      https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/5309
   b. The CROWN Act Official Campaign
      www.thecrownact.com
   c. NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund's Background Resources on Black Hair Discrimination and Bias
      https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/LDF-Primer-on-Hair-Discrimination-Resources-FINAL.pdf
   d. American Bar Association's CROWN Act Brief
      https://www.americanbar.org/groups/business_law/publications/blt/2020/05/hair-discrimination/
4. Imagine that you are Ebony's parents. How would you respond to Dr. Adams and Mrs. Garland? Construct a letter detailing your feelings and the actions you wish the educators would have taken and the language they should have used.
5. The central tenet of CRT is the "permanence of racism." Review your school's handbook and/or code of conduct. Are there other policies or procedures that may be perceived as racist? How so?
6. Read the research article *The Natural Hair Bias in Job Recruitment*. Write a letter to your school board representative explaining why the research findings and implications are relevant for your district's students and staff (Koval & Rosette, 2020).

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Notes

1. A national designation awarded to K-12 schools based on their overall academic excellence or their progress in closing achievement gaps among student subgroups.
2. On September 22, 2020, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the CROWN Act. It will now head to the Senate for consideration.

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Angel Miles Nash is an assistant professor of Leadership Development at Chapman University in the Donna Ford Attallah College of Educational Studies. Her research endeavors center the emboldening of Black girls and women in K-20 education, intersectional leadership, and the ways educational leaders support underserved students in STEM education.