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Classroom Management #Karen:

What Can Educators Learn from a Meme?

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Abstract

Much has been written about how race and the demographic mismatch of mostly white teachers teaching mostly Black and brown students has contributed to the over-disciplining of this same population of students. Further, research has shown that when students have teachers of the same race they are less likely to experience exclusionary discipline practices. While recent studies have considered the role of gender, along with race, in school discipline, the focus remains primarily on the gender and race of the students, with fewer studies considering specifically what it might mean for school discipline that U.S. teachers are mostly white women. This paper takes up that focus and applies the recent #Karen meme to an analysis of the school discipline gap, ultimately offering implications for education practitioners and researchers.

Keywords: School discipline, classroom management, #Karen meme, white women teachers

On June 25, 2020, Education PowerED, a group focused on promoting culturally responsive and transformative practices in schools, posted on Facebook, "If we're being completely honest… Some teachers call administrators with the same mindsets as Karens who call the police on children." The post was quickly shared. Around the same time, blog posts were popping up on parent and educator discussion boards about this same topic: the way "Karens"—shorthand for white women, "who have become infamous online for their shameless displays of entitlement,

privilege, and racism—and their tendency to call the police when they don't get what they want" (Lang, 2020, ¶4)—show up in K-12 classrooms, often as evidenced in their unjust disciplinary practices (e.g. Stevens, n. d.).

We knew exactly what PowerED and the authors of these posts meant. As a former assistant principal, Author2 witnessed white women teachers call administration when their students, who were predominantly Black and Latinx, "acted out" or, better said, didn't immediately conform to what the teacher expected them to do. In these instances, it was often the case that the teacher had established had established a learning environment that was neither culturally responsive, nor meeting the needs of her students. While, one way Black and brown students respond to what was essentially a violent learning experience (Nasir, 2012) is to "act out," for these teachers the problem was the students.

Similarly, in her research focusing on novice teachers and classroom management, Author1 found a troubling pattern in which the white women teachers—demographically representative of the majority of U.S. K-12 classroom teachers (NCES, 2021)—told stories that implied the need to "manage race," that is to minimize students' discussions of race or remarking on racial difference (Author1, 2017). This was an approach grounded in what Annama, Jackson, and Morrison (2017) name as "color evasive." In describing their handling of classroom management incidents, the white women were also the only participants in the study who described calling on school administrators and invoking official school district policies. While Author1's study involved too few participants (7 total, and 2 white participants, both women) to suggest broader implications based on race and gender background, and Author2's experience remains anecdotal, the connections are insightful as educators have begun to discuss the role of Karens in the mistreatment of Black and brown youth in recent years. Thus, we came together as

two women educators of color (Author1 identifies as Black-biracial and Author2 identifies as Afro-Latina) each with over two decades of experience working in public K-12 schools, to explore this phenomenon.

In this essay, then, we delve into the characteristics of Karens that show up in schools and contribute to unjust disciplinary practices. We also consider what can be done to address the matter. Though, an ultimate goal would be to not have any racist teachers in our classrooms and to racially diversify the profession, in the meantime, there might be other means to begin intervening, starting with those who don't realize that they are exhibiting Karen-like behavior in ways that are ultimately harmful to students. Additionally, we argue that education researchers and practitioners need to shift the gaze from focusing solely on the race and gender intersections of students who are overly-disciplined (that is Black and Native boys and girls [e.g. Morris & Perry, 2017; Whitford, 2017]) to focusing on the race and gender intersections of those who are doing the disciplining, most likely white women teachers, aided by white administrators of all genders, based on the demographics of the field (one helpful example of focusing on teacher race is Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Finally, we suggest now is an opportune time to emphasize this focus as pandemic restrictions wane and schools return to more and more consistent in-person instruction in classrooms.

Background

While we use “classroom management Karen” in the title of this essay for its alliterative value, the dynamic we seek to explore is not only about what happens within single teachers' classrooms, but also in schools and school systems with regards to disproportionate school discipline. Teachers' struggles with management—the skills and techniques used to maintain order and promote on-task behavior—may lead to disciplinary action in the form of

administrator referral, detention, suspension, and ultimately expulsion (Author1, 2017). That is, as classroom management incidents escalate, students become involved in school disciplinary systems. Therefore, classroom management and school discipline are deeply intertwined, but are not synonymous and this interconnection lies at the heart of the Karen dynamic in schools, as it is the teacher who often gets the disciplinary ball rolling.

Race, Gender, and School Discipline

What is known about race, gender, and school discipline largely focuses on what is known about the disparities in experiences and outcomes for Black boys and girls, often compared with white peers and due to the demographic mismatch of mostly white teachers teaching mostly Black and brown students (e.g. Morris & Perry, 2017; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2011). For instance, research shows that when students have teachers of the same race that they are less likely to experience exclusionary discipline practices (Lindsay & Hart, 2017) and that Black boys experience disproportionate exclusionary school discipline practices (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Some scholars have tied these patterns to expectations around, and sanctioning of, certain performances of Black masculinity. For example, Rios (2011) writes about the role of perceived “hypermasculinity” in the punishment Black boys’ experience in schools.

Similarly, research taking an intersectional lens—a stance that considers the intertwined nature of raced and gendered oppression as important in understanding these dynamics (Crenshaw, 1991)—considers the ways in which Black girls are also disproportionately punished in schools (Morris, 2016; Wun, 2015). In fact, Morris and Perry (2017) find that Black girls in their study were over three times as likely as white girls to receive a discipline referral for a minor or moderate offense, and have the same probability of receiving an office referral as white

boys and a higher probability than Asian and Latino boys. Furthermore, Black girls, like Black boys, are punished for ambiguous behaviors that are open to biased interpretation, such as defiance (see Shange, 2019) and Morris and Perry suggest that the high rate of punishment for Black girls is tied to perceptions of gender transgressions. That is, Black girls are punished for defying white-normative performances of gender.

While this research has illuminated key ways that injustice is perpetuated in schools through raced and gendered disciplinary practices, much of the extant literature has stopped short of considering how intersectionality in terms of teachers' race and gender might contribute to these dynamics. Though, this has not escaped the attention of antiracist and activist educators who have in the past couple years made this same connection between #Karen and school discipline (e.g. Stevens, 2020). Thus, our essay considers how teachers' race and gender—specifically that of white women—might impact the cycle of disproportionate punishment in schools, especially for Black and brown children.[1]

What (or who) is a Karen?

The #Karen meme became a prominent image of "violent…white womanhood" (Lang, 2020) in the summer of 2020 around the same time that Black Lives Matter protests were arising across the country in the wake of George Floyd's murder. In this context, Karens were framed as white women who take it upon themselves to police the actions of others—primarily Black and brown people. Some who could be deemed Karens may claim they "do not see color," or even espouse what would seem to be progressive racial ideals, such as believing in racial equality, all the while contributing to upholding systems of white supremacy through tacit ways, such as wielding microaggressions at colleagues of color (see Jones, 2020).

[1] Proximity to whiteness or white adjacency (see Saad, 2020) might also play a role for some educators of color in perpetuating these same dynamics. Unfortunately, a more thorough discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

While #Karen was newly emerging in the broader U.S. lexicon during this time, the character type it means to describe is a continuation of a historical trope that dates to the period of enslavement—Miss Ann, used to describe the mother, wife, or daughter of a slave owner (Paskin, 2020). Moreover, as white women were positioned as representing the virtue of society, Black men were illustrated as sexual threats to white women, creating a juxtaposition that gave credence to the word of a white woman over that of a Black man (Lang, 2020). The historical antecedent and the modern day incarnation are symbolic of the ways in which white women—often denied privilege based on gender—may exercise what (racial) privilege they have in the oppression of Black and other people of color by enlisting the aid of traditional holders of institutionalized power and authority (such as the police, the overwhelming majority of whom are white men [Data USE, n. d.], or school administrators, the majority of whom are white and slightly more female than male [NCES, 2020]). In general, then, Karens are characterized by drawing on implicit societal conceptions of the virtue of white women and victimhood at the hands of Black and other people of color.

It is important to note that elsewhere education scholars and practitioners have written about other memes meant to expose and characterize white women's complicity in upholding systems of racial inequality. For example, Matias and contributors (2019) wrote about the "Becky" archetype. Describing Becky as "…a characterization of a white woman who engages in privilege and power in deleterious ways" (p. 9). Beckys are usually younger than Karens and may be unaware of their privilege and take advantage of it (Dictionary.com, n. d.). This seeming obliviousness doesn't make Beckys less culpable in their actions. But, we purposefully focus on the Karen archetype to consider the ways white women may contribute to unjust school disciplinary practices given that the archetype is often associated with the phrase of "Can I speak

to the manager?" (Dictionary.com, n. d.) and otherwise invoking other authority figures to enact their will.

Finally, we acknowledge that the term "Karen" may be considered sexist and problematically so. After all, there are no equivalents for white men that have the same social salience. Additionally, it is arguable that in some ways, the Karen meme places sanctions on (white) women's assertiveness. Yet, #Karen captures the unique intersection of race and gender that many of the United States teaching force occupies as white women.

Karens, Discipline, and Whiteness as Property

To analyze the Classroom Management Karen phenomenon, we draw on "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993) as a lens. This concept, which theorizes how whiteness functions as property and, consequently, is deemed a valuable possession that is protected under the law, is a key element in white dominance. There are four pillars that define the property functions of whiteness (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). First is rights of disposition, meaning the ability to be the arbiter of all decisions. Second is rights to use and enjoyment, which allows white people the entitlement to reap the benefits of whiteness. Third, reputation and status property, confers a higher reputation and status on anything that is related to whiteness. Finally, the absolute right to exclude, entails the right to exclude others.

Historically, slavery actualized the human binary that gave rise to whiteness and conferred a set of rights to white colonizers that included an exclusive right to own property, both tangible and intangible, while excluding these rights from those placed on the other side of the binary—those that were not seen as "white." In the classroom, whiteness as property shows up in the white racial hegemony of the curriculum, pedagogy, and established norms of the

school and classroom environment (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This makes it a particularly illuminating lens with which to examine the practices of Classroom Management Karens.

Karen Caught on Camera

In this section, we draw on three widely circulated #Karen videos to draw out lessons for educators. Though we hesitate to perpetuate the violence caused by Karens, we begin by briefly summarizing the three incidents separately, making connections to common school scenarios, to illustrate key points in our argument. We then describe salient patterns across all three. We do not include classroom videos as few exist, likely because of restrictions about students' phone use and not because of lack of Karen-like behavior on the part of teachers (Web and social media searches for related terms, like "ClassroomKaren" garner limited relevant results).

In the "Indio Karen" video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11W7CLxNuCE) a white women is seen yelling into a camera as a passerby records her reactions to a 17-year-old street vendor, Francisco ("Chuy") in her neighborhood of Indio, CA. According to reports, the woman had been harassing the street vendor and described her reasoning in the recording, stating, "I don't want him in my neighborhood." She says the street vendor contributes to "lawlessness" and "brings down quality of life."

In this video, we see a reaction to the physical presence of a brown boy in a white space (Anderson, 2015). This is similar to students in a school hallway, or standing or walking around a classroom "without permission." In both this video and related school scenarios, the Karen figure is attempting to enforce the rights to use aspect of whiteness as property. She is attempting to maintain a space that whites are free to enjoy without the presence of non-white interlopers, who do not share these rights.

The "Parking Lot Karen" (https://www.insider.com/parking-lot-karen-tiktok-video-dispute-beach-savsoares-2020-5) video shows a white woman sitting on the hood of a not visible driver's car preventing the driver from parking. From the audio, "Karen" can be heard telling the person she is presumably with to pull into "your *right* spot" (emphasis added). The passenger in the blocked car pleads for the woman to move, pointing out that there are at least two open spaces. The school equivalent of this situation is when Black and brown students speak "out of turn" or, similar to the driver in the parking lot, move about "without permission." As with "Indio Karen," "Parking Lot Karen" and her teacher equivalents are again enforcing the right to use principle of whiteness as property. The white woman in the situation has the right to freely enjoy the space (literally the parking space in the case of this video) and others who diminish this right must be dealt with.

This final incident is the one that pushed "Karen" into the mainstream lexicon. The video of "Central Park Karen" (https://www.kqed.org/arts/13900749/central-park-karen-amy-cooper-remains-unrepentant-about-central-park-karen-ing) shows a white woman threatening to and calling the police on a Black birdwatcher in Central Park. The precipitating action was the birdwatcher asking "Karen" to follow the rules of Central Park and put her dog on its leash. In response, the woman told the police a Black man was threatening her life. The main motivating factor in this incident is the lack of "respecting" the presumed authority of a white woman, which is similar to instances of school disciplinary referrals in which students are described as "disrespectful," or "defiant."

While myriad results come up when searching on Youtube for "Karen memes," they all largely show the same types of behaviors in different contexts as described above. From these

videos we identify three key underpinnings of Karen-eqsue behavior: Karens see themselves as victims; Karens claim moral authority; and Karens rely on others to enforce their will.

What Can Educators Do?

The cycle of disproportionate discipline discussed earlier in this article has been widely known as a key precipitator of the school-to-prison pipeline (see e.g., Shedd, 2015). Therefore ending the cycle of disproportionate discipline is crucial and requires action on multiple fronts. One focus of this essay is addressing what happens at the school level, and most specifically what happens in the classroom. Addressing the ways teachers who fall within the Classroom Management Karen archetype interpret and react to the behaviors of their Black and brown students is a fundamental step in ending the cycle because much like police officers, teachers—regardless of race—serve as agents within a sanctioned institution, and as such their word usually carries more weight than that of students. For this reason, we need to critically examine the disciplinary actions of teachers, especially when these actions may be masking the bigger issue of teacher efficacy, or we do a disservice to our students and to the institution of schooling.

Literature and research on culturally responsive teaching, as well as on restorative justice practices provide clear guidance on what teachers can do to effectively and equitably address student behavior. For instance, Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran (2004) developed a five-part culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) model that begins with teachers recognizing their own cultural lens and biases. Reflecting on one's racial identity and the impact it has on how teachers see and react to Black and brown students is critical. Teachers can ask themselves questions such as,

- How have I traditionally reacted to the presence of Black men or men of color?
- Do I believe that I am entitled to receive my students' automatic respect?

- What would it mean for me to have to earn my students' respect, including and especially that of Black youth?

In addition to reflecting on one's cultural lens and biases, teachers need to reflect on their pedagogical practices to understand the impact their teaching has on the classroom environment, and thus triggers student behaviors. For instance, teachers can reflect on:

- specific student behaviors and why they find those behaviors bothersome
- what was happening in the classroom or with the learning prior to the behavior (the antecedent). What was the teacher teaching/doing? How might the instruction at the time have contributed to the behavior?
- Did the lesson or curriculum take into account students' cultures, language, learning needs and styles? Was the topic and/or the way it was being presented relevant to students' lived experiences? Did the lesson or unit position students as creators of knowledge in their own right? Does it support the development of a positive academic and personal identity for students (Nasir, 2012)?

Lastly, teachers can reflect on how they are currently dealing with or reacting to students' behaviors and ask themselves:

- Why do you feel an administrator can handle the situation better than you?
- How do you currently react to students' behaviors? Have you tried culturally responsive and/or restorative justice practices? If so, what was the result? If not, why? What's preventing you from trying these practices?

Administrators and colleagues can also disrupt the cycle of disproportionate discipline by refusing to automatically side with Classroom Management Karens. Instead, they can support their colleague by asking them to reflect on their cultural lens and biases, their teaching and their

approach to interacting with students. Teachers should be supported in unlearning what they see as a "neutral" perspective.

We further call on education researchers to shift the gaze from focusing on the disproportionate rates at which Black and brown children are punished in schools to focusing on those doling out the punishment. We offer whiteness as property as one particularly helpful lens for this exploration and urge education researchers to begin by asking themselves how white dominance impacts the research questions they even think to ask. That is: how does whiteness as property show up in research questions and design, and how might shifting the gaze from Black and brown students as disproportionately disciplined to white women teachers as the overwhelming majority of disciplinarians disrupt the workings of whiteness?

Final Thoughts

Karens don't necessarily think they are doing anything wrong with their actions. In fact, they think they are doing something right in upholding the social order and standards of morality that provide them comfort and validation. Further, in districts and states with zero tolerance or expulsion policies (Curran, 2019), which was beyond the scope of this essay, Karens may be doing what is required by their job. Therefore, given the deleterious effects of their actions, it is imperative that educators work within schools to reveal, challenge, and eradicate Classroom Management Karen behavior. It is also equally important that education researchers move away from fetishizing the "discipline gap" experienced by Black and brown students to attempting to uncover the nuanced ways in which the race and gender of those acting as enforcers of rules impact their actions. Exploring #Karen and the connections to school discipline may offer one step in that direction.

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