

Child Q: A Case Study of the Adultification of Black Girls in Schools

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Abstract

Sylvia Ikomi is an early career researcher who is completing an Economic and Social Research Council Stuart Hall Foundation 1 + 3 PhD studentship in education at the University of Leeds. In 2022 the news of the strip searching of a Black secondary school girl (now referred to as Child Q) in a school/academy in London appeared in the news headlines. Child Q's school/academy called the police concerning an issue of potential drug possession by Child Q. She was subjected to a traumatic intimate strip search by police officers, whilst menstruating, in the absence of an Appropriate Adult and without her mother being informed (The City of London and Hackney/CHSCP, 2022, p.2). This incident has led to a wider public discussion about the adultification of Black girls. Whilst a significant amount of coverage has been given to the police's role in the case of Child Q, this article explores the role of Child's Q's school/academy and how its actions leading up to and on the day of this incident are arguably demonstrative of the wider issue of the adultification of Black girls in schools and academies. This case study helps readers to answer the question how do teachers' adultify Black girls through their discourse? This is done through an analysis of the case of Child Q and the wider academic literature on this topic. The article is approached from the perspective of inferences that can be made from the facts that were published in the Independent Child Commissioner's report through a critical discourse analysis with a conclusion that society's adultified discourse about Black girls can put Black girls in a position in which they require safeguarding from their safeguarders.

Keywords: Black Girls, Adultification, Safeguarding

Note from the Author: This article contains some graphic detail that some readers may find to be distressing.

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The Strip Searching of Black Children

In early 2022 the news of the strip searching of a Black secondary school girl (now referred to as Child Q) in London appeared in the news headlines. Child Q's school/academy called the police concerning an issue of potential drug possession by Child Q. She was subjected to a traumatic intimate strip search by the attending police officers, whilst menstruating, in the absence of an Appropriate Adult and without her mother being informed (The City of London and Hackney Safeguarding Child Partnership/CHSCP, 2022, p.2). This appalling incident led to a demonstration calling for the prosecution of the police officers that were involved and has led to a wider public discussion about the adultification of Black girls. Adultification is defined as a two-fold process: "a process of socialization, in which children function at a more mature developmental stage because of situational context and necessity" (Burton, 2007 as cited by Georgetown Centre on Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p.4). An example of this is when a child who is dealing with an alcoholic parent experiences a reversal of roles in which they are forced to act as the responsible adult in the relationship (Burton, 2007, p.339). It is also "A social or cultural stereotype that is based on how adults perceive children...in the absence of knowledge of children's behaviour and verbalizations" (Goff et al., 2014 as cited by Georgetown Centre on Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p.4). Child Q's case will be explored through the lens of the latter.

The Children's Commissioner for England (Dame Rachel de Souza) obtained data from the Metropolitan Police confirming that "650 children aged 10-17 were subjected to a strip search from 2018 to 2020" and that "75% were aged 16-17 and 25% were aged 10-15" (Children's Commissioner, 2022, p.10). The data shows that 58% of the children "were Black" (377 out of the 650), "20% were White" (130 out of the 650), "16% were Asian, 5% were 'other' ethnicity and 2% did not have their ethnicity recorded" (Children's Commissioner, 2022, p.10). The Commissioner states that she is "deeply concerned that the MPS has been strip searching children as young as 10 on an almost daily basis" (Children's Commissioner, 2022, p.13). There appears to be a racial element involved in the high rate of Black children contained in the figures and there is an issue of the adultification of children that requires urgent attention. The arguably racialized nature of Child Q's experience is highlighted in her mother's submission that she believes that she was being judged 'for having a "head of locks"' (CHSCP, 2022, p.15).

Whilst a significant amount of coverage has been given to the role of the police in the case of Child Q, this article explores the role of Child's Q's school/academy and how its actions leading up to and on the day of this incident are arguably demonstrative of the wider issue of the adultification of Black girls within the education system.

The Independent Child Safeguarding Commissioner's Report

The City of London and Hackney's Safeguarding Children's Partnership's Independent Child Safeguarding Commissioner published his report in March 2022. It is acknowledged that the City of London and Hackney Independent Child Safeguarding Commissioner states the following in the report: "Whilst taking account of interviews and written statements, the review does not draw any firm conclusions about each event in question. Some remain subject to investigation as part of ongoing complaints" (CHSCP, 2022, p.8) the writer of this article applies the same approach. It is acknowledged that the school/academy and teachers concerned may feel that there is an additional context and specifics in this case that contributed to them making the decisions that they made. It is acknowledged that this article

will not have this information and will be limited to the facts as outlined in the Independent Child Safeguarding Commissioner's report. In relation to the personal circumstances of Child Q, the report states that "Beyond the immediate events of the strip search at school, the review has kept information relating to the background and context of Child Q's lived experience to a minimum. The reasons for this are three-fold. Firstly, to protect Child Q's identity and that of her family, secondly, to allow for the report's publication and thirdly, because the review considers much of this information to be largely irrelevant" (CHSCP, 2022, p.6).

The Safeguarding Commissioner's report references the fact that someone known to Child Q had been suspended from her school/academy for being in possession of drugs (CHSCP, 2022, p.9). Her school/academy states that her association with this student combined with other observations that teachers had made; and a believe that she was smelling strongly of cannabis led to its concern that she was in possession of drugs on the day the police were called (CHSCP, 2022, p.9).

The Safeguarding Commissioner was unable to reach a conclusion on whether the teachers knew that Child Q would be strip searched by the police due to "inconsistencies in the accounts of those involved" (CHSCP, 2022, p.8).

The writer of this article does not claim to know exactly what the teachers were thinking when engaging in the actions that were outlined in the report.

Methodology

The Safeguarding Commissioner's report includes statements from interviews with Child Q and her relatives and the staff at her school/academy. This article is approached from the perspective of inferences that can be made from the facts that were published in the Independent Child Safeguarding Commissioner's report, with a key focus on an analysis of the most salient discourse within the review pertaining to the adultification of Child Q. A broad approach is used for the discourse analysis that is applied for the purpose of this article, for example, it excludes an analysis of the grammar, syntax and phonology of the discourse and centres on the rhetoric that is reflected within the discourse. Norman Fairclough argued that "sociolinguistics is strong on 'what' questions'...but weak on 'why' and 'how'" (Fairclough, 1989, p.8). In consideration of this, the analysis of the discourse within the report is supported by an exploration of its connection to the wider academic literature on the adultification of Black children within schools.

The Adultification of Child Q in Her School/Academy

Child Q's denial of drug use was ignored by her teachers who searched her bag, scarf, shoes and blazer (CHSCP, 2022, p.2) and did not find any drugs. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel "held a firm view that had Child Q not been Black, then her experiences are unlikely to have been the same" (CHSCP, 2022, p.33). The Safeguarding Commissioner dedicated a section of his report to the issue of adultification, applying the findings of Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality's report *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls'* and Jahnine Davis' and Nicholas March's 2020 study of the issue of safeguarding whilst adultifying Black boys *Childhood* (CHSCP, 2022, p.34). The Safeguarding Commissioner's report applied information from a letter that Child Q's aunt wrote to the reviewing panel that stated that "The family do not believe that the officers

would have treated a Caucasian girl child who was on her monthly period in the same way” (CHSCP, 2022, p.15). “Child Q was made to take her pad off, something so personal and exposed in such a way to strangers” (CHSCP, 2022, p.15). “She was made to bend over spread her legs, use her hands to spread her buttocks cheek whilst coughing.” “She was not permitted to use the toilet despite asking” (CHSCP, 2022, p.15). This traumatic process has had a severe impact on Child Q. The juxtaposition of her status as a child and the adult experience that she was subjected is highlighted in her statement:

- “Someone walked into the school, where I was supposed to feel safe, took me away from the people who were supposed to protect me and stripped me naked, while on my period” (CHSCP, 2022, p.11).
- “... On the top of preparing for the most important exams of my life. I can't go a single day without wanting to scream, shout, cry or just give up.” “I feel like I'm locked in a box, and no one can see or cares that I just want to go back to feeling safe again, my box is collapsing around me, and no-one wants to help” (CHSCP, 2022, p.11).
- “I don't know if I'm going to feel normal again. I don't know how long it will take to repair my box. But I do know this can't happen to anyone, ever again” (CHSCP, 2022, p.11).
- “All the people that allowed this to happen need to be held responsible. I was held responsible for a smell” (CHSCP, 2022, p.11).

Child Q's mother states that:

- “Child Q is a changed person. She is not eating, every time I find her, she is in the bath, full of water and sleeping in the bath. Not communicating with us as (she) used to, doesn't want to leave her room, panic attacks at school, doesn't, want to be on the road, screams when sees/hears the police, and we need to reassure her” (CHSCP, 2022, p.12-13).
- “We try to get her to do things and reassure her. Child Q is not the same person. She was a person who liked to be active and get into things. Not now, she has changed. She comes home, goes upstairs in the bedroom and closes the bedroom door. Saying she is doing mock exam studies, she just locks off, saying ‘leave me alone.’ When sleeping, (she is) screaming in her sleep, I have to watch her” (CHSCP, 2022, p.13).
- “She is now self-harming and requires therapy. She is traumatised and is now a shell of the bubbly child she was before this incident” (CHSCP, 2022, p.15).

The Safeguarding Officer that was involved in the school/academy's decision to contact the police states that:

In my experience with police [at her previous schools], where there has been a suspicion of carrying drugs or a weapon, and police found it necessary to conduct a search, it would only be a ‘pat down.’ I have known drugs to be found in socks or a waistband as I had witnessed that before, twice in my career. I have never known any more than that on site or known a student to be taken off site. (CHSCP, 2022, p.22)

I am an experienced Designated Safeguarding Lead with over 6 years' experience of safeguarding and liaising with the police to support young people. I have never known, nor would I condone a strip search of a young person on a school site. (CHSCP, 2022, p.22)

The Safeguarding Officer's reference to being accustomed to police 'only' giving a student a "pat down" indicates a lack of a full appreciation that after searching Child Q's bag, scarf and shoes and finding no drugs, and even in the absence of taking these steps, this would be a disproportionate response to a suspicion of drug use that would serve to traumatize Child Q rather than supporting her. Her reference to her experience of working with the police in instances in which a 'pat down' would take place as working "with the police to support young people" reflects a lack of full appreciation (even at this investigatory stage of the matter) of the active harm that this approach causes (in scenarios like Child Q's) rather than the safeguarding that the statement is intended to reflect. Unfortunately, Black children's characteristic as Black often contributes to an oxymoronic situation in which they can require safeguarding from the very teachers who are meant to safeguard them.

The Independent Child Safeguarding Commissioner found that Child Q's school/academy did not sufficiently approach its situation with her through the lens of its duty to safeguard her (CHSCP, 2022, p.24 and p.34). The detail of the breakdown in communication between Child Q and her school/academy that culminated in the school/academy calling the police is outlined in the report in a series of events that took place prior to the police being called. Child Q's adultification is arguably reflected in these events.

A Critical Learning Incident

A key incident that occurred prior to the police being called was Child Q's mother receiving a telephone call from the school/academy in which it raised a concern about her turning up to the school/academy with red eyes and being "intoxicated" as a result of suspected drug use (CHSCP, 2022, p.9). Her mother explained that she had stayed up all night anxious to do well in the exam that she had the following morning and that was why her eyes were red. The school/academy's incident log of the call states that her mother was warned that "... if this behaviour continues or that if she is found with weed/drugs on her she will not be able to continue her place with [the school]" (CHSCP, 2022, p.10). This telephone call was a critical learning incident in this matter. Child Q was also anxious about maintaining her exams on the day that the police were called and referred to her exams as "the most important exams of my life." Child Q's aunt's statement reflects the wider context of this, she describes her niece as a former school prefect and high achieving student (CHSCP, 2022, p.14). It is understandable for a child with this academic background to be particularly anxious about her exam performance. Child Q would have benefited from the school/academy treating this conversation with her mother as a critical learning incident and changing its approach to handling this matter. Her anxiety could have been acknowledged and handled with supportive pastoral care. It is possible that some of the teachers in Child Q's school offered this. This article does not purport to contain a record of Child Q's relationship with all the teachers in her school/academy, it is appreciated that there are different dynamics in the relationship that students have with different teachers and that their dealings with a few teachers does not define the entirety of their education experience in a school or academy. However, the fact remains that the handling of this telephone conversation and the follow-up steps taken by the school/academy in a more sensitive and constructive fashion could have prevented the continued deterioration of relations between Child Q and her school/academy.

The Case of Child Q and the Wider Academic Literature on the Adultification of Black Girls in Schools

George Town Centre on Poverty and Inequality's 2017 study on the adultification of Black girls comprised of 325 members of the general public in the United States of America being surveyed on their views on Black girls under the guise of a study about children's development in the 21st century (Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p.7). 74% of the survey participants were white, 62% of them were female, 69% of them held a qualification beyond a high school diploma and 39% of them were between the ages of 25 and 34 (Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p. 7). The survey results revealed that "across all age ranges, participants viewed Black girls collectively as more adult than white girls. Responses revealed that participants perceived Black girls as needing less protection and nurturing than white girls, and that Black girls were perceived to know more about adult topics" and to be "more knowledgeable about sex than their white peers" (Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p. 8). This adultification applied from the Black girls that were referenced as being aged 5 (Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p. 8) to between the ages of 15 and 19 years old.

Georgetown Centre on Poverty and Inequality's research participants concluded that Black girls are more independent (Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p.1). Within a school context, this perception could lead to a lack of guidance and mentoring being given to Black girls (Georgetown Center for Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p.1) For Child Q, a view of her as being independent may have contributed to the lack of a supportive approach to support her through her exam anxiety and the failure to consider calling her mother prior to the police strip searching her.

Georgetown Centre on Poverty and Inequality's research respondents also concluded that "black girls need to be supported less" (Georgetown Center for Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p.1). Within a school context: teachers' focus may be on punishing vulnerable Black girls rather than supporting them. The school/academy's response during and following its telephone conversation with Child Q's mother could be reflective of this. The idea of Black girls needing to be supported less could be reflected in the way the school/academy treated Child Q following the traumatic strip searching that she was subjected to. Her mother states that she "was asked to go back into the exam without any teacher asking her about how she felt knowing what she had just gone through" (CHSCP, 2022, p.13). It is acknowledged that this is her mother's perspective and that the school/academy may have a different perspective. Due to the trauma that Child Q was dealing with it would be unreasonable to expect her to remember everything that everybody around her said to her after the strip search.

George Town Centre of Inequality's respondents stated that Black girls "need to be comforted less" (Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p.1). Within a school context this perception could manifest in a breakdown in communication in which a child's anxiety that requires comforting is ignored or regarded as anger or aggression and punished. Child Q required comforting over her exam anxiety (especially in the context of her being a former school prefect who was a high achieving student), but the focus was on disciplining her to the point of potentially criminalizing her.

The high-profile nature of the *Black Lives Matter* movement coupled with contemporary issues of the institutional racism within the police means that most people are aware that

Black people are arguably more vulnerable to unfair treatment from the police. The aforementioned statistics on the percentage of Black children that were strip searched between 2018 and 2020 is indicative of this. The school/academy appeared to disregard this in its decision to call the police. It was her teachers' job as the responsible adults to assess and weigh the possible consequence of their actions before taking them, instead Child Q was left to go unaccompanied into a room with police officers and to essentially protect herself from any wrong treatment. The Safeguarding Commissioner makes a reference to a member of staff following Child Q when she was being taken to another office, not in order to support her or to supervise her encounter with the police but rather "to make sure that Child Q didn't attempt to dispose of anything in her possession" (CHSCP, 2022, p. 9). This reflects the adultification of Child Q and the handling of her as a criminal that needed to be caught rather than a traumatized child who was not in possession of drugs. The Safeguarding Commissioner refers to the teachers not being adequately informed of the need for an Appropriate Adult to be in the room with Child Q and the attending police officers (CHSCP, 2022, p.9). If they as adults (including school designated safeguarding leads) were vulnerable to malpractice that could arise from their lack of knowledge about the police procedure in these circumstances, why would they imagine that a child would fare better than them and would not also be vulnerable to this lack of information and potentially exploited by the police officers? This harrowing and intrusive search was wrongly conducted as though Child Q was guilty of a crime despite the Safeguarding Commissioner concluding that "there is no evidence that Child Q was resistant to the search undertaken by school staff or that there were any indicators in her behaviour that she might be hiding drugs on her person" (CHSCP, 2022, p.9). It is accepted that the school/academy may have a different perspective on this statement. However, the fact remains that Child Q situation was dealt with in a disproportionate manner.

Georgetown Centre on Poverty and Inequality's respondents concluded that Black girls know more about adult topics (Georgetown Center on Inequality and Poverty, 2017, p.1). Within a school context: studies show that Black girls can be regarded as being deliberately sexually provocative in their dressing when some of them are just more physically developed than their peers (Andrew et al, 2019, p.2534) and the adultification bias of the teacher is being projected onto them. A perception of Black girls knowing more about adult topics could have contributed to the school/academy's persistent view that Child Q was in possession of drugs and attending the school/academy under the influence of drugs. It could also have led to a perception of Black girls as being more accustomed to dealing with the police in a way that would not lead to a sense of a need to protect Child Q when considering whether to call the police. A sense of her innocence as a child that would be overwhelmed by police involvement may have been more heightened in the teachers had they been deliberating on what to do with a white girl that they felt was in possession of drugs or under the influence of drugs. The sense of the disproportionate nature of the steps being taken may also have been heightened in the teachers had Child Q not been Black. Georgetown Centre on Poverty and Inequality's research participants believed that Black girls know more about sex. Within a school context: this can lead to a lower standard of safeguarding being applied when Black girls are displaying the signs of being abused (Andrew et al, 2019, p.2534) or a failure by schools/academies to identify the signs that a Black girl has been subject to a form of adultification that Linda Burton calls mentored precocious knowledge (Burton, 2007, p.336) due to being groomed by an adult. This underscores the importance of the Safeguarding Commissioner's findings of an issue of a safeguarding approach that sought to punish a child that was suspected of drug use rather than supporting her, underpinned by her "being seen as 'the risk' as opposed to being 'at risk'" (CHSCP, 2022, p.24).

City and Hackney's Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel concluded that: 'We noted your decision to carry out a local child safeguarding practice review (LCSPR) but would encourage you to think carefully about whether one is necessary as we felt that this case was not notifiable and did not meet the criteria for an LCSPR' (CHSCP, 2022, p.3). Whilst this statement may have been made due to issues with the wording of the guidance for the escalation process, it does still raise a concern and could be indicative of a broader systematic safeguarding issue for cases of this nature.

The breakdown in communication between Child Q and her school/academy (as outlined in the Safeguarding Commissioner's report) highlights significant issues with the adultification of Black girls in schools/academies that lead to a conclusion that it cannot be assumed that schools/academies are truly safe spaces for Black girls.

Conclusion

The discourse analysis of the review into Child Q's academy's conduct, coupled with the wider academic literature on detrimental views that members of society often hold about Black girls, reflects the adultification of Black girls in school as an intensified embodiment of society's adultification of Black girls on a macro level. An assumption that teachers are exempt from these views due to nature of their job is problematic. Future research on this topic will benefit from a greater application of discourse analysis of social discourse in this area on a micro and macro level and an exploration of the relationship between the two.

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