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ARTICLE

(Un)Leveling the Playing Field: How AI Creates Synthetic Gaps in Achievement, Opportunity, and Educational Equity for Black Students

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been increasingly framed by policymakers and technology companies as a transformative solution to educational inequity, particularly for historically marginalized youth that attend under-resourced, racially segregated schools. Consequently, AI technologies are being adopted and deployed in K-12 institutions at breakneck speeds, often without critical awareness of how anti-Black racism exists as the central organizing logic of both the sociotechnical infrastructures (e.g., code, data, algorithms) and architectures (e.g., formal integration with institutional power structures like law enforcement) of these tools. In order to better understand the academic, socioemotional, and carceral impacts that anti-Black AI systems have on Youth of Color, this article foregrounds the voices and perspectives of 27 Black highschoolers from Southern California and asks them to consider how, if at all, AI mediates their experience with educational equity, access, safety, and opportunity. A qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, written reflection papers, small-group video blogs and whole-group class discussions showcases how the proliferation of AI technologies into K-12 schools has actually worked to exacerbate educational disenfranchisement for Black youth, giving rise to *synthetic equity gaps*—a term introduced to describe how biased sociotechnical systems cause artificial reductions in achievement, opportunity, safety, and inclusion for historically marginalized students.

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been increasingly framed by policymakers and technology companies as a transformative solution to educational inequity, particularly for historically marginalized youth that attend under-resourced, racially segregated schools. Consequently, AI technologies are being adopted and deployed in K-12 institutions at breakneck speeds, often without critical awareness of how anti-Black racism exists as the central organizing logic of both the sociotechnical infrastructures (e.g., code, data, algorithms) and architectures (e.g., formal integration with institutional power structures like law enforcement) of these tools (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Noble, 2018). As a result, studies are beginning to show a burgeoning connection between the proliferation of AI technologies in schools and the increased surveillance, discipline, and underachievement of Black students (Crooks, 2024; Johnson & Jabbari, 2022; Okoh, 2023). For instance, automated grading systems employ biased algorithms rooted in notions of Black intellectual inferiority, assigning grades to students based on deficit assumptions of Blackness rather than on the quality of their submitted work (Feathers, 2019; Smith, 2025; Tan et al., 2026). Early warning systems falsely identify Black students as future dropouts and disciplinary problems at disproportionately high rates (Feathers, 2023). School safety technologies meant to block harmful or explicit content consistently flag Black English (Chung, 2019) and searches for Black history as dangerous and inappropriate (Feathers & Mehrotra, 2023). Anti-cheating technologies use computer vision systems that are unable to ‘see’ Black students as human, resulting in locked exams, failed tests, and disciplinary action for these youth (Clark, 2021). And because many of these AI-powered technologies are directly connected to law enforcement, algorithmic misfires that conflate Black culture, language, and identity with deviance also facilitate early contact with the carceral system, threatening student retention and exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline as a result.

Given the speed and scale at which schools are implementing AI technologies in the hope of securing educational equity on behalf of historically marginalized youth, and the multifaceted harms that biased AI technologies can pose for these same students, it is essential that the educational community critically interrogate how AI technologies work to resolve, impede, or even exacerbate equity gaps for Black students in K-12 settings. To do so, this article centers the voices, experiences, and sociotechnical insights of 27 Black high-school students who navigate AI-inundated urban schools in Southern California, and invite them to collaboratively answer the following research question: “What effects, if any, do AI technologies have on the educational equity gaps experienced by Black youth?”

Literature Review

Despite long-standing efforts to close equity gaps for historically marginalized youth, extant literature shows that Black students continue to endure inequitable, dehumanizing, and racially hostile conditions as they traverse the K-12 educational pipeline (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Howard, 2024; Jenkins, 2022; Morris, 2016). Not only are Black students more likely to attend schools that are underfunded, dilapidated, and racially segregated, but they are also more likely to attend institutions that have high rates of teacher and principal turnover, and that lack access to high-quality learning resources, including digital technology, fully credentialed teachers in core academic subjects, and up-to-date textbooks (McMurdock, 2022; Mehrotra et al., 2021). Black youth are simultaneously less likely to attend schools that have culturally relevant curriculum, access to mentors and teachers of color, and have staff trained in culturally competent or trauma-informed practices—resources that have been empirically linked to higher rates of academic engagement, achievement, feelings of belonging, and retention for these youth (Howard, 2019; Warren & Coles, 2020). Schools that serve predominantly Black student populations are also less likely to offer gifted and talented (GATE) programs, advanced placement (AP) classes, and academically rigorous extracurriculars, such as coding or robotics, that adequately prepare students for competitive college and career pathways (Pearman & McGee, 2022).

Unfortunately, these structural barriers to educational equity are often compounded by repeated assaults on Black culture, humanity and intellectual abilities that exist across pedagogical, curricular, and interpersonal domains (Howard, 2014; Solorzano et al., 2000). Long-held beliefs in Black criminality, cultural deficiency, and intellectual inferiority continue to shape how Black students are treated by members of the school community, including teachers, peers, administrators, and school resource officers (Cabral, 2024; Muñiz, 2021). As a result of these stereotypes, Black youth are rarely identified as gifted, talented, or eligible for high-performing learning tracks by their educators, even when they attend well-funded schools that have access to advanced placement opportunities (Collins et al., 2020). Instead, they are disproportionately tracked into remedial and low-performing pathways regardless of their interests, engagement, or achievement in school (Oakes, 1995, 2005). Black youth are also more likely to attend schools that enforce zero-tolerance discipline policies, making them exceedingly vulnerable to hyper-surveillance, over-discipline, and campus-based assault by school police (Annamma, 2017; Cabral, 2024; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Love, 2019). All in all, Black youth are caught in a complicated web of educational disenfranchisement that impacts their educational experiences across a multitude of equity indicators.

The complexity, durability, and impenetrability of educational disenfranchisement for Black youth is no doubt one of the driving forces behind schools' rush to adopt AI as a means of achieving long-standing goals of educational access, opportunity, and inclusion for all (Kriha et al., 2025; Lubelfeld & Winnick, 2025; Sylvestre, 2023). Studies documenting educators' rationale for adopting AI into their classroom practice confirm this, and teachers consistently cite the ability to provide more highly personalized learning opportunities, provide academic support to struggling learners, and create more accessible resources for marginalized learners as some of the top reasons for their decision to use AI (Diliberti et al., 2024; Langreo & Solis, 2024). Since AI can automate rote tasks like lesson planning, grading, and providing in-depth feedback to students, schools are hopeful that AI adoption will not only cut costs for teaching assistants and professional development trainings, but also give teachers increased time and capacity to do the 'heart work' at the center of high-quality teaching and learning (Walton Family Foundation, 2025). Finally, because AI is constructed as inherently objective and race-neutral, educational practitioners often believe that these systems can help serve as a protective barrier against anti-Black sentiments and unconscious biases that inequitably and unethically determine how Black students are treated and evaluated compared to their non-Black peers.

Although Big Tech's promise of a quick fix to long-standing equity issues is enticing, scholarship examining the impacts of AI-powered technologies on the educational experiences of low-income Black and Brown students bring these grandiose assertions into question. For years now, tools like ChatGPT and Khanmigo have

been introduced to schools as “STEM-optimized” learning assistants that can augment mathematics instruction by providing around the clock, highly individualized support to struggling students. And because middle- and high-school mathematics continue to act as racialized gatekeepers to college, bottlenecking Black students’ opportunity to participate in honors and advanced placement courses that would make them competitive applicants for college (McGee, 2021; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2019), educators are often eager to integrate these technologies into their formal curriculum. However, the fundamental inability of LLM’s like Khanmigo to consistently and correctly solve complex mathematical problems is well documented (Barnum, 2024; Roy et al., 2025). This is because GenAI chatbots rely on probabilistic patterns in human language to answer user prompts rather than any substantive understanding of quantitative reasoning or problem solving, limiting their capacity to engage in the type of complex reasoning and contextual understanding needed to adequately solve—or teach—mathematics to struggling learners (Bastani et al., 2025; Song et al., 2026). This is perhaps why researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found that Students of Color who learn math using ChatGPT actually perform *worse* on math tests than those who refrain from its usage entirely (Barshay, 2024). Ultimately, the marketing of these tools directly to under-resourced, underfunded schools as correctives for social ills, like anti-Black racism and socially engineered poverty, that produce gaps in achievement and opportunity for Black youth also means that the students who struggle the most will most likely bear the brunt of these socio-technological failures, experiencing algorithmically induced performance gaps as a result.

Similarly, when it comes to social science education, interdisciplinary research shows that AI chatbots are severely limited in their ability to provide humanizing, culturally responsive and inclusive education for marginalized students in general, and Black students in particular. This became evident when researchers prompted Khan Academy’s Harriet Tubman AI, an educational chatbot powered by ChatGPT and designed to teach social studies from a first-person perspective, to share facts with users about African American history. In response to these queries, the tool responded with whitewashed, racially hostile, and wholly inaccurate information about slavery, reparations, and critical race theory (Brockell, 2023). Though it may be tempting to assume that such displays of anti-Black racism are more of an outlier than a norm, research shows that when GenAI learning technologies take on the persona of historical figures—a use case that is on the rise amongst K-12 educators (Klein, 2025; Muncey, 2025)—their toxicity levels and proclivity for racist sentiments rise astronomically (Brockell, 2023; Deshpande et al., 2023). This is due, at least in part, to biases present within ChatGPT’s training data. According to researchers, ChatGPT levies unprecedented levels of anti-Black racism at Black users—the highest levels ‘ever experimentally recorded,’ in fact (Hofmann et al., 2024). Unfortunately, as these tools continue to scale, their proclivity for anti-Black racism scales along with them (Birhane et al., 2024). It is this practice of anti-Black optimization—where AI technologies get increasingly sophisticated at producing covertly racist sentiments and outputs—that has led researchers to caution against their wide-scale adoption, noting the ‘astronomical risks’ these tools pose to African Americans (Hofmann et al., 2024). So while teachers cite the ability to create highly personalized and accessible learning materials for diverse learners as a salient reason for adopting AI (Diliberti et al., 2024; Special Olympics Global Center, 2024), it seems more likely that these tools will actually *increase* the chances of disseminating culturally irrelevant, historically inaccurate, or even racially distressing content, further widening existing gaps in Black students’ sense of trust, belonging, cultural connection, and inclusion in schools.

Finally, although school safety technologies are among the most popular and widely used forms of AI-powered technologies in majority-minority schools, the role they play in mediating schools’ ability to achieve long-standing educational equity goals remains both under-discussed and under-analyzed in popular narratives about AI in education (Crooks, 2024; Laird & Dwyer, 2023). Weapons detection systems, facial recognition software, and surveillance technologies are just a few of the AI-powered tools used to detect and deter threats to campus safety and student wellness, and schools are looking to adopt more AI-powered safety systems in the coming years. These tools are also increasingly integrating generative AI features into their socio-technical infrastructures, promising to expedite school safety responses through automated threat detection, predictive analysis, and real-time decision support. Unfortunately, as research is beginning to show, the most salient

threat to Black students' safety and well-being on campus is often the AI technologies themselves (Herold & Harris, 2019). For instance, weapons detection systems (like those meant to detect assault rifles used in mass shootings) are riddled with anti-Black biases that cause the machine-learning algorithms to misidentify Black hairstyles, such as locs and braids, and personal hair-care items, such as combs or brushes, as deadly weapons (Young, 2025). These algorithmic misfires can lead to more frequent bodily searches, pat downs, and physical assault by school resource officers and local law enforcement—an increasingly common side effect of navigating zero-tolerance schools with high surveillance infrastructures (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Love, 2016). Likewise, facial-recognition technologies used to track attendance and verify the identity of campus visitors struggle to accurately identify people with melanated skin, making it exceedingly likely Black students will be falsely identified as a wanted criminal compared to their non-Black peers (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). In fact, in one study of New York public schools, researchers found that campus-based facial-recognition software misidentified Black boys at a rate four times higher than white boys, and Black girls at a rate *16 times* higher than white girls (Feathers, 2020; McCormack and Coyle, 2020). In the end, these tech-mediated 'stop and frisks' not only place more students on the discipline track, but they also put them in direct contact with the carceral apparatus at higher rates, quietly expanding the scope and scale of school-to-prison pipeline via automated inequality and the New Jim Code (Benjamin, 2019).

Together, these studies highlight the need to critically interrogate mainstream narratives that assert AI integration into K-12 schools will inherently bring about equity for the most disenfranchised student groups. Instead, the educational community must strive to better understand Black students' everyday lived experiences with AI in ways that move beyond narrow examinations of their personal use of these tools to either support or circumvent high-quality learning (Tanksley, 2024). More specifically, studies on AI in education must adopt more expansive frameworks of equity that consider how AI technologies can deny Black students inclusion, protection, safety, opportunity, nurturance, and acceptance even as they advance equity and opportunity for other groups (Crooks, 2024; Love, 2016; Rafalow, 2020). To do so, educational researchers must adopt a socio-technical, rather than a purely technological, approach to AI in education, understanding innately that technologies do more than shape the social fabric of schools and the lives of students who exist within them through their biased outputs; rather, it is precisely because AI systems are imbued with the logics of colonialism, white supremacy, racial slavery, and patriarchal capitalism that these ontological underpinnings can neither be minimized or ignored in educational research. In the following section, I describe how my choice to leverage critical race technology theory (CRTT) in education as a theoretical framework for this work enables me to conduct this type of interdisciplinary, systems-focused, and historically anchored analysis and to do so in collaboration with—rather than on behalf of—Black youth.

Theoretical Framework

Designed in response to calls for more intersectional, algorithmically conscious and ecological examinations of digital technologies in educational settings (Garcia & Nichols, 2021; Vakil, 2018; Vossoughi & Vakil, 2018), CRTT works to expose the existence of anti-Blackness as the default setting and organizing logic of both schools and school-based technologies (Tanksley, 2026). This framework disrupts majoritarian narratives that characterize digital and artificially intelligent systems as post-racial, apolitical, and inherently democratic and instead acknowledges the matrices of domination encoded within twenty-first-century digital systems (Noble, 2012, 2014, 2018). In doing so, CRTT "shifts discourse away from simple arguments about the liberatory possibilities" of AI and EdTech toward more critical engagements with how digital technologies act as "a site of power and control over Black life" (Noble, 2016, p. 2). Ultimately, CRTT works to expose the racialized layers of subordination embedded within digital technologies that have historically restricted Black youth's access to, representation in, and agency over digital systems that influence their educational, sociopolitical, and technological experiences (Tanksley, 2016, 2024). The following tenets form anatomical underpinnings of CRTT in education:

- 1 *The inter-centricity of technological racism and algorithmic anti-Blackness*: CRTT in education acknowledges that anti-Black racism is permanent and deeply ingrained within the very fabric of American society both online and offline, and should therefore be centralized in discussions of educational equity and access (Bell, 1995; Dumas, 2014), especially as it relates to technology and AI. Foundationally, CRTT acknowledges that the institutional disease of white supremacy (Solórzano, 1997) has been digitally upgraded and algorithmically codified, and that its invisible presence within technological hardware, software, and infrastructures is a source of inequity for Black youth.
- 2 *Challenging dominant ideologies of techno-solutionism and tech-neutrality*: CRTT interrogates dominant narratives of racism, education, and technology by challenging oversimplified constructions of AI and EdTech as post-racial, ungendered, and politically neutral. Importantly, this tenet showcases how the proliferation of AI and other emerging technologies has introduced new forms of racial violence and digital surveillance that make schools less safe, less equitable, and less inclusive for Black youth.
- 3 *Commitment to socio-technical justice*: CRTT aims to abolish algorithmic racism and its sociotechnical intersections (e.g., classism, sexism, ableism.) and appendages (e.g., settler colonialism, capitalistic patriarchy, techno-fascism.). Thus, CRTT demands a staunch interrogation of how schools' increasing reliance upon and entanglement with Big Tech and the AI industry exacerbates environmental racism, economic disenfranchisement, and carceral cartographies in ways that disproportionately impact Black youth and their communities around the globe.
- 4 *The centrality of experiential knowledge*: CRTT recognizes that lived experiences of marginalized youth are legitimate and critical to understanding the current condition of educational inequity (Huber, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso 2002) and socio-technical oppression (Tanksley, 2026). For far too long, Black youth have been spoken for and about, but rarely are they centered as the experts of their own experiences (Collins, 1986) in education or technology. Thus, CRTT positions Black youth's socio-technical experiences, insights, and funds of knowledge as an indispensable source of information that will help bring about more just educational and technological futures.
- 5 *The interdisciplinary perspective*: CRTT actively integrates race and racism within an interdisciplinary context by drawing upon scholarship from ethnic studies, gender studies, data science and information studies, computer science and computing, digital humanities, and more.

Methods

This study analyzes qualitative interviews with 27 Black high-school students that participated in a five-week summer course on race, education, and technology in Southern California. In addition to analyzing students' interviews at the close of the program, I also review a robust qualitative dataset including audio recordings of whole group discussions, weekly written journal reflections, and student-generated video blogs. Importantly, I selected data sources that would allow me to capture perspectives that arise in various settings (e.g., individual, small group, whole group), modalities (e.g., written work, recorded videos, live discussions), and at different points in the course (e.g., daily, weekly, once per program, etc.). Each data source is discussed in more detail below:

- **Semi-structured interviews** were conducted at the close of the five-week program, and were completed synchronously via zoom. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes, and asked youth to share their thoughts on the course, their uses of and perspectives on AI, and their on-the-ground experiences with AI in school. For the purpose of this article, I analyzed questions related to AI and their schooling experiences (e.g., “What AI technologies, if any, does your school allow you to use?” “Tell me about the technologies

your teachers, administrators or school resource officers use” and “How, if at all, do you think AI can be used to advance educational equity for Black students?”)

- **Whole group discussions** occurred during each class session and were audio recorded to ensure that I accurately captured students’ questions, concerns, and peer-to-peer interactions in real time. These sessions were often led by students, who would ask questions, build off each other, and prompt deeper discussion through the sharing of personal experiences, references to class readings, or a review of lecture notes.
- **Student-generated video blogs** were completed at the end of each class session and lasted about 7–10 minutes each. Students gathered into self-selected small groups and used an iPad and a mini microphone to record their thoughts on the day’s lesson. Students were instructed to treat these sessions as video blogs (‘vlogs’) similar to social media podcasts, TikTok lives, and Twitch streams where teens and young adults discuss trending topics for either a live or asynchronous audience. The activity, which encouraged the participants to speak to an imaginary audience of other teens and young adults, allowed them to engage in a practice of communal knowledge construction that was already familiar to them.
- **Digital journal entries** were assigned weekly on Fridays and submitted to our online portal by Sunday evening. Each week, students were assigned a short news article to read related to the week’s topic (e.g., EdTech and surveillance, social media algorithms and anti-Black racism, AI-generated content and digital blackface, etc.). This was not a graded assignment, and students were simply asked to respond casually to what they read, either making connections between the article and their lived experience, or between the article and class discussions/course readings more broadly. Students were encouraged to interrogate, further research, and ‘fact check’ articles against their own experiential knowledge, which was a strategic pedagogical move meant to foster their critical thinking and ability to speak truth to power.

Data Analysis

I began my analysis by focusing on the final interviews, as I was most interested in capturing students’ thoughts after completing five weeks of discussion and reflection. Specifically, I used grounded theory (Merriam, 2009) to begin open-coding all of the transcripts ($n = 27$) for themes related to students’ on-the-ground experience with AI-powered technologies in their schooling context. These interviews were key to understanding the types of AI-related encounters that were most frequently and most saliently impacting students’ learning experiences. Once I established preliminary codes from the interview dataset, I conducted a targeted review of student vlogs looking for instances where groupmates explicitly discussed educational technologies they used or encountered in school, including AI-powered writing assistants (e.g., Grammarly), learning technologies (e.g., ChatGPT), anti-cheating technologies (e.g., Turnitin), school safety technologies (e.g., GoGuardian), and the like. To guide my selection of videos, I used the summaries that I generated while transcribing, cleaning, and organizing video files into a comprehensive data log and selected videos whose summaries met my criteria. I then began coding the transcripts from the relevant vlogs (seven) to see what types of experiences students were having with AI-powered technologies in schools, paying close attention to where, how, whether, and when students’ encountered algorithmic racism in digital (e.g., within AI detection software) or analog (e.g., within teachers’ application of AI plagiarism policies) contexts. I was interested to know whether and how these systems impacted students’ learning, making sure to consider impacts that transpired beyond grades, including mental health, relationships, sense of safety, and consequential learning to name a few. I repeated this process for the two remaining datasets—whole group class discussions and digital journal entries—using the larger theme of ‘experiences with AI and other educational technologies’ to guide my selection of relevant entries. My targeted review identified seven relevant whole group discussions and 46 digital journal entries that met the criteria. As I completed my coding process, moving across all four datasets, my codes were refined, collapsed, deleted, and expanded until I was left with three cross-cutting themes.

Findings

Broadly, my analysis showed that biased sociotechnical systems—that is, the combination of technological systems (e.g., hardware, software, infrastructure) and social systems (e.g., cultural norms, institutional policies, and pedagogical practices)—produce *synthetic gaps* in educational equity for Black students. Specifically, these systems negatively impacted educational equity in three main ways: (1) *artificially deflating grades and reducing academic performance*; (2) *limiting or outright restricting access to educational resources and learning opportunities*; and (3) *exacerbating racialized disparities in school punishment and push out*. Across each of these instances, students discussed how anti-Black sociotechnical systems worked to curtail their access to equitable levels of achievement, opportunity, safety, and well-being as their non-Black peers. Each theme is discussed in more detail below.

Artificially Deflating Grades and Limiting Educational Opportunities

One of the most prominent examples of socio-technical bias experienced by students in this study was accusations of AI-facilitated cheating. As Malia explains, teachers “don’t want you using [AI] for writing, so they’ll use Turnitin” or some other software to detect AI-generated content. Despite being promoted as objective and trustworthy, AI detectors were believed by the students in this study to be inherently faulty at distinguishing between human- and AI-generated text. In fact, nearly all of the participants had been falsely flagged at least once by an AI detector, and many of them endured multiple false flags. Malia states, “I don’t think that [AI detectors] recognize AI right because I wouldn’t use AI for my papers and it would say this percent of your paper is AI, or flag certain sentences.” Noriah agrees, noting, “I’ve definitely been falsely accused of using AI multiple times and it would be on the essays that I use no AI at all, not even to check my grammar. But my teacher would put my essay in there, and it would be like 70 percent AI.” After being falsely flagged multiple times for AI-facilitated cheating, Angel decided to test the accuracy of several popular detection tools using an essay he wrote entirely on his own. He states:

I threw it in an AI detector and it said my work was flagged as over 40% AI, which is crazy, because I did all this authentically myself. It made me wonder, could it flag higher on a different AI? And it actually did. I tried a couple AI detectors. It flagged lower, higher. Some went up to 60 percent AI. So it’s not very credible at all.

Unfortunately, the academic consequences of being falsely flagged for using AI were steep, and included failed assignments, reduced grades, and even course push out. Eva notes, “it really can affect your grade depending on what assignment they think you cheated on. My current AP Lit class essays are worth 40 percent of our grade. So if I were to get flagged ... my grade would just be a zero. That’s a whole 40 percent drop in my grade.” Brennan, whose school employs similarly strict policies on AI usage, says “if an essay or a piece of work that’s significant is written with AI, there will be a zero and the student will not receive credit.” At Malia’s school, a false flag can have a devastating effect on students’ college-going efforts, including being removed from Advanced Placement (AP) pathways that offer post-secondary course credits. She says, “if you get caught using AI, you get a zero on the assignment, you get dropped from the AP class, and you can’t take the AP exam.”

During a whole-group debrief, the students discussed what it means to have work that “sounds like AI.” They asserted that sounding “too intelligent”, “too perfect”, or “too smart” rendered them suspicious to both their teachers and the AI detectors. Saleni experienced this first hand, recalling:

I was taking a writing course, and I turned in my first essay, and the professor was like, “Are you sure you wrote this essay? It’s good.” ... Why do professors think just because you sound good when you’re writing that you’re using AI, but you’re really not?

Saleni's question prompted a rich whole-group discussion about the underlying racial connotations of AI-cheating accusations. According to Chuck, it's a racially coded way of saying "you sound white." His peers agreed, arguing that assumptions of Black intellectual inferiority and white racial and cultural supremacy are often to blame for the false flags. According to Iyana:

The baseline for what people perceive as smart is definitely a white person. So if you appeal more to what they believe is "white", you know, "proper English" (which is really just closer to whiteness), then that's "too AI-y" for a Black student.

Naomi builds on Iyana's argument, stating:

My school has a high percentage of Black students. Almost every single one of our teachers are white, and there's always this imbalance and distrust of everything we do. So if you're one of the students that they believe is incapable of writing to the level of "AI writing," then you have no way of defending yourself.

As a result, the students in this study began developing sociotechnical strategies to "AI-proof" their writing. Unfortunately, most of these work arounds involve reducing the quality of their work in ways that affirm prevailing beliefs about Black intellectual inferiority. As Noriah explains,

I don't want to dumb [my writing] down, but I have to. I have to restrain myself from using em dashes, because it's gonna look like AI if I use them. So now, I'm not even trying my best on the [assignment]. If I use em dashes, I'll take some out and restructure the sentence, and instead of using really, really big words, I'll use medium big words.

Nearly all of the youth used similar strategies, explaining how they insert run-on sentences or spelling errors into their essays to avoid being algorithmically scrutinized. Though "AI proofing" has become standard practice among the youth in this study, the emotional and psychological toll it takes on them should not be overlooked. According to Natalia:

It's really unfair to people who are putting in the work, and who are really knowledgeable on correct grammar and just putting out the best work that they can. And you turn that into an AI checker, and they're telling you that your work is 95% AI. I feel like that's just not fair to the people who are really on their grammar.

Iyana feels similarly, adding:

I know people who never used AI in their life. They're just *that* intelligent ... And to be highlighted and spotted out for using AI when they never did, I feel like that's so unfair. I feel like AI can definitely be weaponized against us and used in ways that it shouldn't be. Because now you're criminalizing someone for something that they didn't do. For being smart and wanting to learn.

Ultimately, schools' rush to adopt AI has created new algorithmic barriers to equitable achievement, assessment, and opportunity for Black youth, who find themselves caught in a sociotechnical double bind. They can either submit work that reflects their true intellectual ability and risk being flagged, penalized, and pushed out; or they can "water down" their work in ways that avoid algorithmic scrutiny but nevertheless generate mediocre scores that undersell their ability altogether.

Limiting or Outright Restricting Access to High-Quality Educational Resources and Learning Opportunities

In addition to faulty AI detectors, the students in this study also navigated school safety systems, including content moderation software and behavioral management technologies, that use AI to block inappropriate content and proactively scan for threats to student wellness and campus safety. Despite these altruistic aims, the youth in this study found these technologies to be demonstrably harmful to both the teaching and learning process. According to Erica, “they literally block everything. If I search up ‘multiplication table’ and try to click on the image or website that shows the multiplication table, it will block it.” Tatiyanna, who describes her school safety tools as “probably too aggressive”, recalls a time when the system interfered with her college application process. She remarks, “I was trying to apply to a scholarship the other day, and it wouldn’t let me access it since the website was blocked.”

Not only did these tools block access to pertinent educational resources in general, such as coding platforms or math-related instructional videos, but they also disproportionately blocked students’ access to content about Black identity, history, language, and political activism. Tatiyana recalls, “One time I was doing a research paper on the ‘Central Park 5’ but when I tried to open an article, it was blocked.” Erica adds, “I’m taking a government class and I’ll search up certain laws about immigration or minorities and how it’s affecting them, and it’ll block it. How is that fostering a learning environment for anyone to further research the topics that we’re learning in school?”

Melody recollects a similar experience in one of her weekly journal reflections, writing:

A lot of school districts have begun to block information regarding identities, especially those part of the LGBTQIA+ community. One time I had to do a project and make a collage on the different types of media that influenced my life...doing this assignment on a school computer made it hard because everything that shaped who I am was blocked.

As a result of these biases, Bella feels AI-powered technologies serve as “more of a learning restriction” than a safety measurement. She argues, “they are suppressing [Black] students’ access to knowledge and therefore hindering their education.” Likewise, Erica believes, “It’s all about compliance. They only want you to know this little bit of information, just enough to get the job done, but never to educate yourself any further. It’s disappointing because it makes me feel like I’m being robbed of my education.” Knox echoes these sentiments, noting that biased technologies ensure that “Black students are exploited into receiving base-level information that doesn’t challenge them or spark social activism.”

Malia suspects that this racially biased approach to ‘safety’ has macro level ramifications on the Black community writ large. In her small group vlog, she theorizes:

... with the blocking of websites that show our history, I think that plays into...how they structure schooling to teach you just one version of our history, like, enslavement. And if we were to go and search things that were radical or more accurate to our history, then it’s threatening to them. So, then it’s blocked on our websites, and we can’t view it. Then that plays into society as a whole feeling that Black people are less than because then it’s even embedded into us, like the way that we think about ourselves.

Interestingly, the sociotechnical counterstories shared in small groups sparked a larger, whole-group discussion about histories of segregation and redlining, during which several students identified anti-Black, carceral approaches to AI and EdTech as “digital redlining.” As Iyana explains, “There’s two schools on my campus. There’s a [charter] school which is predominantly white, and there’s my [public] school which is predominantly Black.” According to Tasha, the charter school “started taking all of our buildings, so they

literally have half of our campus now. We actually walked out, we had a student protest, because they were taking away all our classrooms.” In addition to sequestering buildings and removing access to shared public spaces, the new charter school also erected what students referred to as a “racially segregated Wi-Fi” system—one that provides fast, restriction-free service to the predominantly white charter school students, and one that is throttled by low bandwidth, digital content restrictions, and algorithmic surveillance tools that render it functionally useless for the predominantly Black public school students that rely on it for their education. As Iyana explains:

When you’re on my school’s Wi-Fi, you can’t open up certain tabs and a lot of the stuff that we have is restricted. They actually monitor what we’re looking up and what we’re doing. But as soon as I would switch over from my Internet to [the charter school] Wi-Fi, I would have no restrictions. I could look up whatever I wanted to look up, and it would be completely fine. It just shows the distrust they have in Black students compared to any other students.

Iyana, Noriah, Tasha, and Khalid’s experiences with “digital redlining” illuminate how educational technologies are installed and deployed in ways that separate, surveil, and siphon away educational opportunities from youth along lines of race and class, even as they occupy the same physical spaces on campus. However, rather than relegate themselves to a subpar education mediated by racist algorithms, the youth in this study found ways to resist and subvert the newest technological iteration of “separate and unequal.” According to Noriah, “We started getting on [their] Wi-Fi so we could participate in our classes. But then this year, the school changed their Wi-Fi password. They changed it because we were on it and they don’t want us to use it. It took us a month to get back on their Wi-Fi, but we finally did it. We had to grind and grind until we found somebody who knew the Wi-Fi password, and then we started sharing it with our friends and our teachers.” Tasha nods in agreement, adding, “we made sure our teachers had it, our coaches have it, everybody.”

When asked why they work so hard to overcome technological barriers to equal access and opportunity, Iyana offers the following response:

I’ve always pursued education strongly, so I’ve always tried to find a way around obstacles that try to block me. But I do sometimes have to sit back and realize they’re blocking this for us, but they’re not doing it for the other schools. It’s just crazy because we just want an education. We just want to learn. But they are doing all of this to stop us.

Cumulatively, these socio-technical counterstories make clear how anti-Black racism informs not only the ways AI-powered technologies are designed and developed algorithmically, but also how they are networked, installed, and deployed in ways that exacerbate long-standing gaps in educational access, opportunity, and achievement for Black youth. They simultaneously illuminate how Black youth resist, subvert, and rewrite biased algorithmic systems to bring forth more just educational conditions for themselves and their peers.

Exacerbating Racialized Disparities in School Punishment and Push Out

Finally, and perhaps most saliently, the youth in this study observed that anti-Black approaches to AI design, development, and adoption served to *widen* racialized disparities in school discipline and carceral contact for Black youth. Many of the students experienced this punitive uptick first-hand, noting that even small violations of their schools' anti-AI policies resulted in steep disciplinary repercussions. For instance, Axel says, "My school actually has zero tolerance on ChatGPT...If you get caught using it, you have to talk to the dean, and then it goes on your [permanent] record." According to Eva, being accused of AI plagiarism can result in multiple hours of detention, regardless of whether or not the accusation is true. She says, "the minimum punishment you can get for doing anything bad is five hours of detention. You can't participate in activities...if you don't clear your hours, you can't go to prom or homecoming." At Angel's school, the zero-tolerance policy includes other types of AI applications, including video- and image-generation tools as well. He recalls an incident where AI-generated videos were being shared on campus, and his principal responded by telling the students, "if we find AI apps in your phone or [AI-generated photos] in your photos, you'll face serious consequences, and law enforcement might have to step in."

Students noted that AI-powered technologies were increasingly being used for discipline and surveillance rather than for high-quality teaching and learning. Saleni captures this in one of her digital journal responses, writing:

Rather than schools creating safer learning environments where their students can safely express themselves, this approach with the use of AI technology often reinforces existing biases/stereotypes and creates a systematic prison environment. Instead of utilizing these technologies for better uses such as healthcare, transportation or an educational assistant, it is being utilized to treat students like prisoners, ultimately dehumanizing them.

Angelo resonated with Saleni's use of the word "dehumanizing", adding, "our teachers, they expect us to cheat. We just had a guest lecturer visit us, and the first thing he said was 'we already know all of you use AI to cheat.' It just hurts my sense of pride." Unsurprisingly, widespread fears of AI-facilitated cheating coupled with long-standing assumptions of Black criminality have led schools to erect complex, far-reaching AI-powered monitoring systems that normalize cultures of surveillance in majority-minority schools. As Malia says:

Teachers use [AI-powered technologies] to look at what students are doing on their screens and they can use it throughout different classes as well. So you can be out of their class and they're still looking at what you're doing on their screens ... it's like you're constantly being surveyed about what you're doing online.

Natalia noticed similar patterns in her own school. She shares the following anecdote with her peers in their small-group video blog:

What's also kind of crazy is even before you search things, like, just typing it into the search bar, and before you even press enter...it'll just shut down your entire page. I just thought that was pretty crazy. [They're] monitoring the activity on my screen without me even having to click Enter or anything.

Despite being told that AI tools will help protect student wellness and ensure campus safety, students' lived experience with these technologies leads them to believe otherwise. According to Keon, "AI is becoming more than a tool for homework, but another way to spy and invade our privacy, not just as students but future prisoners and criminals." Chuck builds on Keon's analysis, noting, "Tools like facial recognition, phone tracking, and behavior prediction are being used to punish students instead of helping them...schools already treat Students of Color unfairly ... Now, AI is making that worse by turning schools into places where students are watched like criminals."

Importantly, as students learned more about the socio-technical infrastructures (e.g., algorithm, code, data) and architectures (e.g., carceral connections, environmental devastation, data theft, etc.) of the AI tools they encountered in school, they became even more suspicious of AI's capacity to make schools more safe, more equitable, and more welcoming for historically marginalized youth. As Kaiden writes:

AI is being used in schools under the mask of safety but is in reality enforcing harmful systems of control, especially for marginalized students. Certain technologies like facial recognition, predictive analytics, and some behavior-monitoring software in schools target Black and low-income populations. Rather than addressing this, the tools unfortunately increase surveillance and punishment.

Khelani noticed similar patterns, writing:

These tools are more prevalent in schools where there are mostly minorities ... sometimes AI gives out wrong information and shows racism towards Black children. If the AI systems schools are using are not 100 percent correct it can harm the futures of students.

Chuck is concerned that algorithmically biased technologies will exacerbate the educational disparities that Black students already experience, leading to higher rates of punishment, drop out, and carceral contact. He writes, "What worries me is that this kind of technology can make mistakes and start to treat students like threats. When AI is being trained, that data is biased. It targets students who already face racism and other unfair treatment. This means that students who need support might get punished instead of receiving help." Jonathan expressed similar fears, writing:

AI-driven security systems are not perfect; they are prone to racial biases, which lead to students being labeled wrongly, and there have even been instances of students being wrongly arrested ... This can create a vicious cycle in which students are pushed further from school and assistance.

In her small group video blog, Malia begins to analyze "the really heavy aspect of surveillance in all of this" by combining her lived experience with her burgeoning understanding of socio-technical infrastructures. In doing so, she provides a re-articulation of "school safety" that flips the conventional interpretation on its head. She states:

... they're blocking searches, but also they know exactly what you search, which I know that sometimes it can be for safety, but on a broader scale it's not ... having certain words being flagged for police stations ... If Black people are more likely to be mistreated by the police, then it's a very intricate system that they're setting up here. You really have to understand it well if you're able to try to keep yourself safe, not even just in schools but in general.

By offering a race-conscious and counter-hegemonic reading of "safety," Malia makes clear how anti-Black AI technologies are fundamentally unable to keep Youth of Color "safe" from racial discrimination, state-sanctioned violence, and carceral contact—three primary sources of spiritual, physical, and psychological harm for Black youth (Dumas, 2014; Jenkins, 2022; Love, 2016). Keon extends her argument, noting that anti-Black approaches to and designs of AI actually work to keep white supremacist power structures "safe" from exposure, critique, and—most importantly—abolition by marginalized groups. He asserts:

Some Americans are afraid of seeing Black people being educated in this country because when we think critically about the system that runs this country, we often realize it was not made for us. This realization can spark changes through anger and understanding how the system was made. The government wants to stay in control of our communities because they want to regain the power of being superior to us.

It was at this moment that students realized the use of anti-black AI systems in ways that limit their educational opportunities, suppress their critical consciousness, and automate existing connections between schools and prisons is not an accidental occurrence; it is, as Keon states, “designed for a purpose.” He ends his digital journal entry with the following call to action:

The people who are pushing for these [educational and technological] changes are also the same people who are trying to keep us down, ignorant, and stupid. That's why we have to be ahead of technology, so we can keep fighting for our freedom, our equality, and our opportunity. Not just within our communities, but for all.

Discussion and Implications

The experiences shared by students in this study challenge the popular assumption that AI can solve long-standing issues of educational equity for the most disenfranchised students. Instead, they illuminate how the proliferation of AI technologies into K-12 spaces has worked to hide, speed up, and automate educational inequities for Black students in particular, giving rise to *synthetic equity gaps*— defined here as artificially induced reductions in achievement, opportunity, safety, and inclusion for historically marginalized students.

According to Dwyer and Laird (2024), about two-thirds of K-12 educators report using anti-cheating technologies, like AI detectors, to identify AI-generated writing, and this number appears to be on the rise. Despite large-scale trust in and integration of these technologies into schools, research has consistently shown the fundamental inability of AI detectors to accurately and consistently differentiate between AI-generated and human-written content (Davalos & Yin, 2024; Elkhataat et al., 2023). Thus Malia's suspicion that AI detectors can't “recognize AI right”, Tasha's claim that “AI detectors are definitely ineffective” and Nico's experiment that showed AI detectors are “not really credible” is actually backed by a growing body of scholarship bringing claims of “near-perfect accuracy” by AI detection companies into question.

AI detectors' fundamental unreliability is further compounded by racial, cultural, and class-based biases that exist within the algorithmic underpinnings of the technology. Research shows rampant disparities in AI detectors' ability to accurately assess the written work of students who speak non-standard variations of English (Liang et al., 2023), including first-generation immigrants, neurodivergent learners and speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE)—a language whose semantics, pragmatics, and syntax are notably distinct from “standard” English conventions which are culturally and racially white. In one prominent study, researchers tested seven different AI detectors for accuracy and found that they falsely flagged 60 percent of essays written by speakers of non-standard English as AI-generated. Even more startling is the fact that 97 percent of the papers written by marginalized students were flagged as AI by *at least one* detector. These disparities occur because the linguistic conventions of non-dominant languages like AAVE are grossly underrepresented in LLM training datasets, while the conventions of US-born, culturally white speakers of English are overrepresented. As a result, content composed by speakers of AAVE are more likely to be rendered suspect by AI detectors. This explains, at least in part, why Black students in this study report being flagged as “cheaters” at near-constant rates.

Studies have also shown that school safety technologies, such as GoGuardian, are very rarely successful at proactively detecting or deterring threats to student safety (Laird & Dwyer, 2023)—despite having AI infrastructures that access and review intimate student data, including browsing history and cookies, email content, and device usage statistics around the clock. Researchers have also found school safety technologies to be riddled with racial, gendered, and cultural biases that disproportionately harm historically marginalized students. For instance, technologies like Gaggle have been known to identify queer students and conversations about sexual identity as “dangerous”, outing students to teachers, families, and in some cases, the police. They

simultaneously flagged AAVE and languages spoken by Black students as dangerous, resulting in Black students being contacted by police both on school grounds and at their private residences (Dwyer & Laird, 2024; Herold & Harris, 2019). Additional studies have found that web-filtering systems disproportionately block students from accessing content about Black life, history, and culture (Feathers & Mehrotra, 2023; Laird et al., 2025). As a result, Black students are often unable to research topics of interest related to their own identity while at school on the campus WiFi or at home while using their school-owned devices. Since Students of Color are more likely to use a school-owned device due to racially-anchored economic disparities, this means the students who are most directly impacted by disparate content-filtering systems are also the ones that have experienced the most severe levels of educational disenfranchisement to date.

Finally, behavioral management systems, like Hapara, created additional problems for students in this study, who noted an uptick in surveillance and punishment following the release of generative AI systems like Gemini and ChatGPT. As Noriah says, “Over the years, I’ve seen an increasing number of school-based police sent by the district to ‘discipline’ us. Overall, I think this approach to AI will only harm marginalized students further. The constant monitoring and surveillance may contribute to mental health struggles, ultimately leading to increased drop-out rates.” Studies by the Center for Democracy and Technology (2023, 2024) confirm Noriah’s suspicions, revealing that the percentage of teachers that report using AI-powered technologies for disciplinary purposes has increased since 2023 while those that report using them to support teaching and learning has decreased year over year. Students like King, Deondre, and Natalia witnessed this trend first-hand, sharing multiple instances where their teachers remotely accessed their school-owned devices throughout the day, locking their screens, closing their tabs, and evaluating their digital activity long after the school day had ended.

Johnson and Jabbari (2022) determined that schools ranking the “highest in surveillance infrastructure”—that is, schools that employ analog (e.g., drug-sniffing dogs, school resource officers, etc.) and digital (e.g., web-filtering systems, content-moderation software, etc.) technologies at high rates—place more students on the discipline track than low-surveillance schools, “even when controlling for school social disorder and student misbehavior” (Johnson & Jabbari, 2022, p. 1). This means that Sociotechnical systems—not student behavior—play a definitive role in the creation and intensification of racialized discipline disparities in majority-minority schools. This research study also found that schools with high surveillance infrastructures negatively impact Black students’ mental health, making them feel more uneasy, more anxious, and less trusted by their teachers (Kupchik, 2010). This was captured by Malia, who reports feeling “extremely anxious” and “paranoid” that her teachers will monitor her academic performance in real time, or that she will be falsely accused of and punished for using AI.

In addition to placing more students on the discipline track, schools with high surveillance infrastructure also produce academic spillover effects that include “reduced mathematics performances and college enrollment for suspended and non-suspended students alike” (p. 2). This means the academic effects of navigating anti-Black schools and school-based technologies are experienced *school-wide*, regardless of academic standing or behavioral profile. This was indeed the reality for the youth in this study, who encountered technologies that reduced academic performance, hindered extra-curricular learning, and directly impeded their college preparation and enrollment process.

According to educational policymakers, EdTech innovators and proponents of Big AI, issues with biased technologies can easily be solved by simply “keeping humans in the loop.” However, as Leilani notes, relying on human interlocutors to identify and intervene upon anti-Black algorithmic racism neglects the reality that “a lot of people are biased against our race.” Unfortunately, research conducted by Common Sense Media (Madden et al., 2024) backs Leilani’s suspicions, revealing that Black students are more than *twice* as likely as white youth to be falsely accused of using AI to cheat by their teachers. They are simultaneously more likely to be punished for using AI—even when their usage aligns with their school’s AI policy or provides reasonable accommodations as described in their individualized education plan (IEP) (Madden et al., 2024). It is this

constant failure of AI and EdTech to meet the needs of historically marginalized students that has led researchers at the Center for Democracy and Technology (Quay-de la Vallee, 2025) to provide a sobering warning against the rampant, uncritical adoption of AI into schools and classrooms. They state:

Although AI systems offer the potential for significant educational benefits, up to now they have frequently failed to live up to their promises in the education context and have created new challenges for educators and administrators. These failures, whether due to bias, ineffectiveness, lack of fitness for purpose, unintended consequences, privacy violations, or other causes, mean that tools often result in more harm than good, damaging school communities, sapping resources, creating reputational harm, and placing students at risk.

Conclusion

This study centered the lived experiences and socio-technical insights of Black youth that navigate increasingly AI-inundated schools and in doing so, exposed the myriad ways anti-Black AI platforms, policies, practices, and pedagogies creates *synthetic gaps* in achievement, opportunity, safety, and socio-emotional wellness for Black students. Moving forward, it is essential for the educational community to critically interrogate the types of technologies that are willingly and eagerly adopted into schools. Educational researchers, practitioners, and policy makers alike must collectively resist Big Tech's call to "move fast and break things" (Noble, 2018; Tenaj, 2019)—especially when the "things" that are consistently broken in the wake of technological innovation are our schools, our communities, and our young people. As urged by youth in this study, educational practitioners and school leaders must take the time to carefully and cautiously audit AI tools for algorithmic harms *before* unleashing them onto students. As Angelo says, schools "need to stop trying to find these fast solutions instead of working towards a goal slowly... its always 'move fast and break things', okay...but what happens when they break Black kids? Then what?"

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