Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (Part I): Vision-Driven Interrogations of Dominant Narratives

“I am more than just a box”: Latinidades for a pluralistic vision of culturally sustaining education
Pamela D’Andrea Martínez, Ashantie Diaz Johnson, Lilly Padia, & María Paula Ghiso

An Unwavering Commitment To Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education & Social Emotional Learning
Dawn Brooks-DeCosta and Ife Lenard

The Struggle
Reshma Ramkellawan-Arteaga

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining STEM Curriculum as a Problem-Based Science Approach to Supporting Student Achievement for Black and Latinx Students
Yvonne Thevenot

#NormalNeverWorked: The Fight for Black Liberation in the Context of Education and COVID-19
Jacqueline Forbes, Nicholas Mitchell, Gwendolyn Baaxley, Ja’Dell Davis, Gloria Rosario-Wallace, and Christian Kochon

*Plus Conversations from Edmund Adjapong & Kisha Porcher; Zitsi Mirakhur; Cheri Fancisal; and Kathryn Hill; and Kevin Cataldo

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Voices in Urban Education
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Voices in Urban Education (ISSN 1553-541X) is published twice a year in Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter by the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools at New York University in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. It features articles and other works of scholarly and general significance to a wide range of interests and communities who experience urban education through a variety of entry points.

Articles seek to cover a wide range of disciplines with a strong emphasis on trans-sectional and transdisciplinary perspectives aimed at examining successes, problems, and questions in policy, advocacy, and teaching and learning practices in urban education. VUE pays particular attention to pieces that highlight the experiences, hopes, dreams, and concerns of historically underrepresented and vulnerable groups in education along lines of gender, race, sexual identity, dis/ability, language, ethnicity, religion, and indigenous or immigration status. As an open access journal, VUE aims to disseminate important, topical, relevant, and urgent research, thoughts, and commentary to a wide audience.

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We thank students from NYC public schools whose art brings life to this issue of VUE, with particular gratitude to this issue’s front and back cover student artists Korina Moncada, Junior Morel, and Brandon Lee Vidal.

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Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (Part I):
Vision-Driven Interrogations of Dominant Narratives

Editor’s Introduction .......................................................... 7

“I am more than just a box”: Latinidades for a pluralistic vision of culturally sustaining education .................................................. 10
PAMELA D’ANDREA MARTÍNEZ, ASHANTIE DIAZ JOHNSON, LILLY PADÍA, & MARÍA PAULA GHISO
This article explores what culturally sustaining education means for Latinx students. Drawing on the concept of Latinidades, the authors suggest that culturally sustaining education for Latinx students necessitates problematizing the boundaries of this term altogether and making visible the tensions and multiple axes of oppression around what it means to be Latinx. They take inspiration from Latinx students—including one of the authors of this article—who are challenging bounded notions of culture (such as “affinity groups”) and instead foregrounding questions about equitable practices in the day-to-day context of schools.

An Unwavering Commitment To Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education & Social Emotional Learning .......................... 18
DAWN BROOKS-DECOSTA AND IFÉ LENARD
Through an analysis of both SEL and CR-SE practices at an urban school and a social skill building afterschool program conducted through outside support staff, this paper demonstrates the process of providing social-emotional supports with a culturally responsive lens. The authors suggest, without a culturally responsive-sustaining lens, social and emotional supports can lack the trust and connection needed to meet students where they are while acknowledging their unique identities and cultures.

The Struggle ........................................................................ 29
RESHIMA RAMKELLAWAN-ARTEAGA
This essay identifies some of the challenges staff development providers may encounter and identifies ways to approach the work to ensure the greatest impact on students. This includes clearly defining the boundaries and permeability of the work, looking for various entry points, and explicitly addressing adults’ mindsets. For teacher educators who support teachers and administrators looking to dismantle or challenge white supremacy in schools, the work can feel overwhelming but, through deliberate strategies, the work is always possible.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Work before Toolkits: An Interview with Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz about Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education</strong> .................................................. 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EDMUND ADJAPONG &amp; KISHA PORCHER</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This interview highlights how Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education can be utilized to consider new possibilities for and address inequities in urban schools. It discusses the importance of positive teacher identity as a prerequisite for effective CR-SE and Dr. Sealey-Ruiz’s framework of the Archeology of Self, which she describes as a framework that encourages educators to dig deep, peel back their layers, and explore how issues of race, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation live within them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **The Potential of CR-SE for K-12 Computer Science Education: Perspectives from Two Leaders** ................................................................. 44 |
| **ZITSI MIRAKHUR, CHERI FANCSALI, AND KATHRYN HILL** |
| This interview examines the close connection between equity and computer science (CS), and Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CR-SE). The conversation speaks with emergent leaders in CS and provides insights into how they are bringing CS education to New York City’s 1.1 million students, and how they understand and enact CR-SE practices in their work. |

| **The Journey of a Culturally Responsive Teacher Educator** .................................................. 53 |
| **KEVIN CATALDO** |
| This interview explores what it means to be a culturally responsive teacher educator in today’s world and why it is crucial to advocate for a culturally responsive and sustaining education for all students. It shares how an exceptional individual became a culturally responsive elementary teacher, and what it has taken for her to become a culturally responsive teacher educator and educational consultant. |

| **Culturally Responsive and Sustaining STEM Curriculum as a Problem-Based Science Approach to Supporting Student Achievement for Black and Latinx Students** ...... 60 |
| **YVONNE THEVENOT** |
| This article explores the tenets of culturally responsive STEM curriculum, providing an innovative look into STEM teaching and learning, which illuminates student agency, prior knowledge, and positive connections with their teachers. It seeks to answer the question, what happens when students experience informal STEM learning spaces as positive ones that enable them to develop a sense of agency, voice, and academic achievement. |

| **#NormalNeverWorked: The Fight for Black Liberation in the Context of Education and COVID-19** ................................................................. 70 |
| **JACQUELINE FORBES, NICHOLAS MITCHELL, GWENDOLYN BAXLEY, JADELL DAVIS, GLORIA ROSARIO-WALLACE, AND CHRISTIAN KOCHON** |
| The impact of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) highlights familiar inequities across U.S. institutions that are integral to social well-being. While longing for a return to “normal” is expected in a time of unprecedented loss of human life and the relinquishing of routines and comforts, equity-minded individuals understand that “normal” has been and continues to be oppressive at its core. While the disproportionate impacts of everyday educational violence on Black students, educators, families, and communities continue to be overlooked, these educators offer hope and a way forward, one rooted in the humanizing love that CR-SE and Black liberatory practices offer. |
We left 2020 with a clearer vision about what ails us in education.

We weren’t wrong, but seeing clearly, our insights about the failure of urban education, a practice of recognition, which is a political act, should compel us to conclude that we failed to understand the extent of the problem. Thus, we cannot talk about sight or insight without talking about the power inherent in revelation.

Like other systems of power, what we see in education is defined by who is seen and heard, and who is seen and heard are students who happen to be well fed, well rested, and do school in ways compliant with the dominant culture.

By flattening schooling to the image of the dominant, that is, *imagined or idealized* (for some), culture, a narrow version of us got baked into teaching and learning. This version was incomplete, favoring intersections of cis, heteronormative, white, abled-bodied, monolingual English-speaking, monied, and Judeo-Christian—or put simply, privileged—identities. The farther away our students are from these identities, the less likely classrooms, virtual and otherwise, will work for them.

There are many lessons that we should take from 2020. The year gave us clear evidence that our failure to see and hear some students for who they are distorts what education can and should be for them. This distortion drives educational outcome disparities. We have learned that the problem is not necessarily what we do not see or hear but what we think we see and hear—thus, the problem that 2020 revealed was our assumptions and their failure to put forward vision-driven interrogations of dominant narratives.

Absent a framework to interrogate power, assumptions become kinds of stereotypes, and “The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.” The dominant assumption we make about culturally and linguistically plural students is that there is something wrong with them if their access to whiteness or English does sequence well with dominant varieties of culture or language. When we assume that something is wrong with a student because of our biases, we seek to change them to fit systems rather than changing systems to fit students. The logic here is that our students should learn the way we teach rather than our searching to find ways to teach the way our students learn. From birth, we have been “conditioned into accepting and not questioning these ideas.”

In this issue of *Voices in Urban Education*, our contributors put a spotlight on the issues of with this logic; they dramatically show us the damage that is done when education fails to respond to the needs of the learner. They teach us how powerful of a framework culturally responsive-sustaining education (CR-SE) could be for teaching and learning, illustrating how and why we must ground education in a cultural view of learning and human development in which *multiple expressions of diversity* (e.g., race, social class, gender, language, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, ability) are recognized and regarded as assets. Each contributor makes the powerful connection that culture is not an addition to but a critical aspect of education. They should us how, why, and where culture matters in shaping how people learn, that we cannot do education without attending to who people culturally are.

In this issue, we have curated a set of voices that raise awareness of the ways that hierarchies of oppression and exploitation are kinds of inhumane systems that restrict, limit, deny, distort, or destroy individuals and groups of people, refusing their access to their full potential. These acts include ignorance, exclusion, threats, ridicule, slander, and violence (both symbolic and real). In education, these acts have borne unbelievable consequences for culturally and linguistically plural students: silencings and fears, hatreds of self and others, feelings of inferiority and superiority, entitlement and disentitlement.

As we register culture in how and what we teach, the question of power also compels us to examine how education is organized, who gets to participate, and on what terms (cultural and otherwise). Educators committed to understanding both the concept of culture, the place of cultural assets within it, and the particulars of the many different cultures we encounter can now refocus our lens to viewing students not as deficiencies to overcome but as assets, possessing vibrant realities.
and knowledges useful for not only teaching and learning but for dismantling power hierarchies.

Thus, this issue of VUE articulates a vision of education that centers, affirms, respects, and cultivates the assets of our most precious resources—our student. It both claims and confronts the challenges that we face in education—disparities that articulate themselves along lines of language, SES, race, ability, gender, housing status, and so on—and instead of resigning ourselves to the incomplete narrative that we must be hostage to the status quo—contributors provide a theoretically sound, evidence-based roadmap for moving forward and advancing education for all students.

The issue inspires hope and healing, presenting a vision for building capacity through partnerships, where all stakeholders hold important roles and responsibilities for designing education and transforming the lives of our children. This is the basic premise of the issue—which is the most powerful lesson we learned in 2020—that we can transform education; however, no one entity can transform it or sustain our students alone. But working together we can!

This issue, thus, presents a bold and pragmatic vision of education. In doing so, it offers a set of clearly articulated conditions that ground high-quality education on (a) foundations of culturally and linguistically sustaining environments that are welcoming, affirming, and challenging, but also supportive; (b) a belief in students equaled by high expectations and rigorous instruction that connect deeply to the lives all our students; (c) equitable curricula and assessment strategies (that is, the provision of knowledge and assessment used to understand and map student learning as opposed to limiting it); and (d) a view of educators as a network of professionals who require time for critical reflection, ongoing development and support, mentoring, insightful feedback, and community.

Finally, this issue of VUE sees inequities in education as structural consequences of long, deep, and complex histories. It suggests that we can improve education by not ignoring or running from those histories, but by claiming them, confronting them, and dealing with them. At the core of the issue are foundational ideas for transforming education set on bedrock principles—sociopolitical consciousness and sociocultural responsiveness. These principles are visioned as keys for unlocking the doors of opportunity in ways that emit the light of change and bend old histories along the slant of the moral universe and yet closer to justice.

In grounding ourselves in these principles, we collectively become more empowered to speak more broadly to institutional realities—streams of policies and practices, collective beliefs and mindsets that are guided by a deep commitment to advancing the best hopes of our democracy with the goal of making education available to all students across our country, if not our globe, regardless (or better yet, because) of their cultural heritage.

The contributions in this issue of VUE are a step toward remaking.

Endnotes


2 From Robin DiAngelo’s White Fragility, 2018, p. 21.
To truly see myself in what I am taught, I appreciate both sides of my culture. An Indian outfit along with the Guyana flag is the perfect visual for who I am. Both inside and out.
“I am more than just a box”
Latinidades for a pluralistic vision of culturally sustaining education

This article explores what culturally sustaining education means for Latinx students. Drawing on the concept of Latinidades, the authors suggest that culturally sustaining education for Latinx students necessitates problematizing the boundaries of this term altogether and making visible the tensions and multiple axes of oppression around what it means to be Latinx. They take inspiration from Latinx students—including one of the authors of this article—who are challenging bounded notions of culture (such as “affinity groups”) and instead foregrounding questions about equitable practices in the day-to-day context of schools.

The Protector’s Testimonio #1: Falling Through Cracks of Color

I’m more than just a box. I’m an Afro-Latina who can’t enjoy affinity spaces because they are confined by four walls that have posters of powerful White women and school values. Entering a Latinx affinity space and seeing the looks I get from the other Latinas in the room with their straight hair and their “perfect ideal Latina skin,” hoping to feel some form of acceptance, I just get pushed to the corners because I am not Latina enough. Then hoping to find that “enough,” I enter the Sisters of Color affinity space with comments of “Aren’t you Spanish? Why are you here?” and “Oh, you’re half Black, you don’t walk with the same target on your back.” Getting comments like, “you don’t look Black” from one part of my culture, and hearing, “you’re too American” from the other, is part of living life as an in-betweener.

Ashantie “The Protector” is a high school senior in a public school in New York City. People call her Shy but as her testimonios reveal there is nothing shy about her—rather, this naming reflects the type of irony and linguistic play so familiar to many Latinx peoples, like calling attention to a young man across the street by yelling, “Epa, viejo!”

In sharing her testimonios in this article, Ashantie has chosen to go by “The Protector” because that is the role she has taken on for students who are marginalized at her school (y además it makes her feel like a superhero). While adults at the school work to find ways to engage in culturally sustaining practices, The Protector’s experiences reveal the shortcomings in these attempts and raise important questions that we explore in this article: What does it mean for school spaces and pedagogies to be culturally sustaining for Latinx students? How can the testimonios and experiences of Latinx students themselves drive curricular and institutional reform?

In this paper, we draw on the pluralistic concept of Latinidades to probe these questions and tease out possible ways toward achieving anti-hegemonic pluralism in schools. We argue that culturally sustaining education for Latinx students requires problematizing the boundaries of this
Coined by Django Paris (Alim & Paris, 2017) in response to decades of research on culturally responsive and relevant education, culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasizes the premise that education must be anti-hegemonic. When traditional schooling requires the homogeneity of students, it makes success in school a white assimilationist project that subsumes or eradicates the many cultures, languages, learning styles, epistemologies, and histories students represent. Instead, culturally sustaining pedagogy offers an alternative: that we sustain pluralism in education, without attempting to bridge an idea of a dominant culture. Yet, for Latinx students, homogeneity persists in the construction of a singular identity amid many intersecting experiences.

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and social hierarchies. Making schools more culturally responsive and sustaining for Latinx students necessitates problematizing the boundaries of Latinidad and making visible the tensions around what it means to be Latinx, to exist within a category that is both state-imposed and claimed for the purpose of solidarity. By virtue of grouping people with different histories and levels of societal privilege and vulnerability, the Latinx category can also serve to erase and assimilate.

In 2019, New York State released its Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework. Statewide policy support for anti-racist education is situated among complementary efforts in New York City championed by grassroots and youth organizers, and at times by the leadership of the New York City Department of Education itself. This political backdrop creates conditions for schools to design spaces for youth to feel comfortable and explore issues that pertain to their identities. But as The Protector’s experience as an in-betweener within her school’s affinity groups suggests, the translation of culturally sustaining education theory to practice and school structures must stay vigilant in not creating new hegemonic norms. We, the authors, have come together as part of an inquiry group reflecting on our lived experiences as Latinx individuals with Venezuelan, Dominican, Chicana, and Argentinean backgrounds, and how our Latinx identities inform our roles as students, educators, and researchers. Saavedra and Pérez (2017) identify critical reflexivity as an extension of Gloria Anzaldúa’s approach to theory of the flesh, of the spirit, and of the land as a healing process from the lasting effects and inflictions of colonization. This approach requires writing from within, rather than writing about, with a focus on lived experience. Theorizing from within, we wrote and shared our testimonios, our stories that “highlight the power of lived experiences in the production of knowledge, emphasizing that knowledge arises from the body” (Saavedra, 2019, p. 179), to heal wounds and share love through dialogue, and to imagine a culturally sustaining education for, and more importantly, with, Latinx youth.

For this article, we center the testimonios of Ashantie, a high school senior in New York City, and the youngest and most implicated among us, to theorize the transformative power of in-betweenness. Grounded in the experiences she shares, we argue that, while equity work in schools can reify inequities by covering the pluralities and power dynamics of a singular Latinidad, educators can also embrace Latinidades as sites for enacting the pluralistic vision of culturally sustaining pedagogies.

**Exerting White Dominance over Latinx Youth: One Hierarchy of Power**

**The Protector’s Testimonio #2: Language, Appropriation, and Cultural Wounds**

*I had a Spanish class, something I thought I would look forward to ’til a teacher threw a chancla at me and took my culture and did more than appropriate it. Thinking back now, she never really engaged with us. I sat in the back of the room with the other kids who already spoke Spanish. Most of the time we did busy work. We were kind of our own island. The day she threw the chancla happened so fast. All I remember was she threw it at me because I had my head down so she felt like I wasn’t paying attention but I was actually not feeling well. So, my reaction was I picked up the shoe and threw it back at her. I remember the sound of the shoe hitting the blackboard. At that moment I knew I let her get to me. I never reported the incident to anyone.

I was hurt but thought to myself my all White administration is just going to reprimand her for throwing a shoe. What is the point? They won’t truly understand why I was actually hurt. I would’ve had to file a report then apologize for my behavior as well. I kept it in all these years until now. But that day the teacher created a sense of trauma. Trauma that would lead me to learning new terms like inequity, disparities, and culturally responsive teaching. What truly is culturally responsive education when half of the time teachers don’t acknowledge my identity?*

The Protector was able to take a Spanish class, excited to learn in an academic setting the language of her family. Instead, she encountered a non-Latinx White teacher in the classroom, who, backed by a colonial legacy of domination, first appropriated her language and then used the cultural trope of throwing a chancla to hurt and humiliate her Dominican heritage. The message of the incident, embedded in layers of context (i.e., in school, in a Spanish class, with
a teacher who was perpetuating whiteness, with Latinx Spanish-speaking students in the room who were not being engaged academically, and in an anti-Black and anti-Latinx sociopolitical climate, convey to The Protector that she does not belong in school except to be eradicated, where her language and culture can be stolen and weaponized against her. In his ethnographic study of a high school in Chicago and its Mexican American and Puerto Rican students, Rosa (2019) describes the circulation of deficit notions of bilingualism—even by the Latinx principal—that delegitimized students’ linguistic practices against the backdrop of white English-centered curricular norms. Rosa argues that languagelessness—the notion of bilingual students being characterized as not having a language, is a form of “linguistically argued racism” that was instituted in the school’s practices and policies and was inextricably linked to the racialization of the Latinx students in the school. The Protector’s Spanish class was a space where she thought she could explore her cultural and linguistic repertoires, the parts of herself that are not usually sanctioned in school. Instead, her teacher’s actions rendered her languageless at school while Spanish became yet another tool of oppression against her.

Even with the myriad educational initiatives aimed at supporting Latinx students, it is important to raise questions about which Latinx identities are being affirmed and which students continue to remain invisible under a white gaze or marginalized by the policies ostensibly implemented for their “benefit.” In both her affinity group exclusions (Testimonio #1) and the Spanish class chancla incident (Testimonio #2), The Protector experienced hegemonic violence in schools. Both of these incidents led her to ask, what does her school mean by culturally responsive education if in the spaces created for belonging, she did not belong? But there is an important distinction between the two events: in the Spanish class, The Protector was positioned negatively by the non-Latinx teacher and her classroom which reproduced white supremacy, while in the affinity groups, she was positioned negatively by her Black and Latinx peers, who had formed bounded groups that would serve to exclude her. These testimonios of The Protector, representative of the experiences of many Latinx youth, point to the need for culturally sustaining education to contend with vertical hierarchies between groups, and horizontal hierarchies within Latinx peoples (Aparicio, 2019).

Who is Latinx? Taking a Cue from Latinidades

Latinx Studies has been facing the tension between being Latinx and reifying coloniality, and we believe this transdisciplinary vantage point offers lessons for how schools can become more culturally sustaining—more attentive to the complexities, multiplicities, and contradictions of the “Latinx” category than its presumed homogeneity. Rather than thinking of Latinidad as a singular identity, Aparicio (2019) advances the term Latinidades to engage an anti-hegemonic framework for Latinidad:

The term Latinidades, then, allows us to document, analyze, and theorize the processes by which diverse Latina/os interact, subordinate, and trans-culturate each other while reaffirming the plural and heterogeneous sites that constitute Latinidad. Although we urgently need to analyze the vertical power differentials between the Anglo-dominant society and Latina/o racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, particularly in the current political moment of Trump’s presidency and the state’s legitimation of white nationalist ideologies, we must also examine the horizontal differences, conflicts, tensions, and affinities between and among Latina/os of diverse national identities—what I propose as horizontal hierarchies (p. 31).

Latinidades, as opposed to the singular and narrow ways that being responsive to Latinx students comes to be codified in schools, entails reconceptualizing pluralism to include not only a vertical but also a horizontal analysis of social hierarchies. Individuals who self-identify as Latinx, including the four authors of this article, are all differently positioned around race, class, language, immigration status, and gender identities. Surface similarities mask consequential differences and historical oppressions. For example, differences in immigration histories—entangled with other identity markers such as race and class and language practices—are variously experienced by Latinx students. For Pamela, Lily, and María Paula, being White Latinas allows us the privilege of not being subject to discriminatory practices that interpolate Latinx individuals through xenophobic and racist lenses. Some Latinx
students and families experience economic and sociopolitical precarity more than others, and there is immense variability in the Latinx “category” from communities who work in the informal economy or who are targeted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to social elites who have the financial resources and cultural capital to navigate schooling in the U.S. Even “migration” needs to be troubled, with the frequent back-and-forth between Caribbean contexts, like The Protector’s Dominican Republic, or the West and Southwest, where for Chicano communities like Lilly’s, “the border crossed us” is a common refrain. Latin American contexts can be patriarchal and heterosexist, as well as reproducing coloniality through their marginalization of Indigenous and Black communities and their cultural and language practices (Anzaldúa, 2015).

School initiatives aimed at supporting Latinx students too often hinge on hegemonic forms of Latinidad that treat the Latinx category as one group, erasing these crucial differences across national identities, class, race, gender, language, and other social stratifiers (Aparicio, 2019). Even when we subscribe to the idea that we are all mixed (i.e., “mestizaje”), Latinidad is a homogenizing force that erases Afro-Latinx and Indigenous Latinx histories and experiences (Hernández, 2003; Saldana-Portillo, 2017). Erasure can also happen in terms of language. The erasure of linguistic difference across Latinx peoples is yet another manifestation of colonial violence. This happens on the assumption that all Latinx people speak Spanish and in the erasure of Indigenous languages (Saldana-Portillo, 2017) and the many Spanishes, Englishes, and hybrid languages Latinx youth speak. This brief list of (non-exhaustive) examples points to the complexities of enacting culturally sustaining education for Latinx students in order to attend to a broader array of equity issues. Emphasizing power asymmetries within the Latinx community turns us away from pedagogies premised on misguided assumptions about an “ideal” Latinx student and works to funnel resources so that they benefit Latinx communities who are made most vulnerable in the education system. We believe that making visible not only vertical inequities (e.g., Global North–Global South relations), but also horizontal hierarchies allows us to move beyond the unity/conflict narrative of Latinidad by creating spaces for critically engaging inter-Latinx dynamics (across identities) and intra-Latinx dynamics (within identities) (Aparicio, 2019); and by offering possibilities for working in solidarity towards addressing these inequities.

**Anti-Hegemonic Latinidades as Transformative In-betweenness**

Alim and Paris (2017) assert that as U.S. schools become increasingly diverse, education must sustain students’ cultural pluralism. First, cultures will need to be reclaimed and seen for their constant flux and renegotiation, careful not to essentialize or romanticize the past (Frantz Fanon as cited in Bhabha, 1994; Alim & Paris, 2017). Educators who subscribe to static ideas of culture, and singular categories like “Latinx” or “Hispanic” to encompass them, may perpetuate damaging stereotypes, shame students for not living up to what amount to cultural tropes, and even blame families for not teaching youth “their culture.” As such, the project of sustaining pluralism will require thinking beyond appearances of certain pedagogies, even those intended for educational equity. For example, a school may offer bilingual education, but do so in ways that privilege certain language varieties, and ultimately dishonor the many linguistic practices of students and their families. Static concepts of culture are homogenizing and, left unchallenged in reforms meant to be culturally affirming, will miss important distinctions among multiple intersections of identity.

We assert that Latinidades can offer a space for anti-hegemonic transformation, and for educators and students to learn what it means to sustain pluralism. Embracing a Latinidades framework entails seeing Latinx students as in-betweeners, both connected and disconnected from binary identity markers, fractured by colonial logics that would rather erase us than embrace us (Anzaldúa, 2015). In short, under a singular “Latinx,” we fall between the cracks, and worse, invest in the social hierarchies that will privilege some of us (e.g., light-skinned, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, middle class) at the expense of others of us (e.g., dark-skinned, Indigenous, transgender, disabled, poor). Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) writes that when we confront the many
intersecting social positions that fracture us, we have the opportunity to transform, and in that process:

It may be necessary to adopt some type of pan-ethnic term other than “latino” (given to us by mainstream media) or “Chicano/Latino” (cumbersome at best). To derive an appropriate pan-ethnic term we need to identify our common conditions and our different circumstances while honoring our diversity. (p. 74)

The Protector’s story of not belonging to either of the affinity groups at her school—of “living life as an in-betweener”—underscores the fissures of a Latinx struggle that involves reclaiming, rather than subsuming, pluralistic identities. Audre Lorde said, “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” While in-betweeness can mean falling through the cracks, it can also be where hope for something new begins (Freire, 1970/2017; Anzaldúa, 2015; Bhabha, 1994). If we take up in-betweeness as a cue to interrogate the ways we are differentially positioned, we can learn to sustain pluralism. For Latinx youth, critiques that arise from in-betweenness, from noticing injustices to leaning into studying those injustices, can mean taking the leap from passive receiver to agents of our lives and social transformations (Irizarry, 2017).

**The Protector’s Testimonio #3: La rana que escapó el agua caliente**

Being a queer Afro-Latinx student was hard enough, so imagine taking the role of The Protector. In the equity work I do, I spend a lot of my time observing. So imagine conducting walkthroughs and seeing all the Latinx students sitting in the back of the classroom in a group. Where they knew the White teacher would hardly pick on them and when the teacher does, she says, “You can associate words like sphere back to your own language” and you think to yourself, “Wow, so helpful” ’til she picks on one of the few Latinx kids in the room and says, “Isn’t this how you say sphere in Spanish? Esfera.” Seeing those kids in the back of the room reminded me of the time I was in the back of the room not feeling seen. The only time being acknowledged was because the teacher was trying to be culturally responsive but failed at it. Now, as an observer, I had to excuse myself from the room because this is why we see more and more Latinx students lose interest in school.

The Protector’s favorite author, Audre Lorde, said in a 1979 feminist conference where she felt tokenized as a Black woman, “For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 112). Similar to what Lorde experienced, The Protector noticed that some teachers at her school only call on Latinx students for shallow and tokenizing participation that did not engage their existing linguistic repertoires, while substantive participation is catered to and reserved for other students. When her stomach churned with the discomfort of injustice, The Protector left the room. Rather than passive acceptance of injustice throughout her education, The Protector decided to act on it. Despite some bad experiences at her school, The Protector’s show of agency when confronted with her in-betweenness did not go unnoticed. At the behest of one of her “soccer moms,” (her nickname for two teachers who have forged genuine, caring relationships with her), The Protector became involved in Students and Educators for Equity, a youth-adult partnership between the NYC Department of Education, the NYU Metro Center, and high school youth in schools across the city working on uprooting racial disproportionality from within. Through this program, she conducts mixed-methods research on how students feel about their school and what they want from their school, while analyzing the data to understand whether and how students experience racial disproportionality. Her research praxis has led to positive results for her school: more teachers and administrators trained in restorative justice, the formation of peer mediation groups, added sections of AP classes and SAT prep for students to address racial opportunity gaps at her school, and bringing drag culture and Pride Week to a middle school also working with Students and Educators for Equity. Engaging in social transformation work means leaning into what falls between the cracks, and as The Protector began to interrogate her own in-betweenness
with other students, she was able to have agency over her situation and to forge paths toward educational equity in her school.

**The Protector’s Testimonio #4:**

*In change, I matter*

The first time I noticed real change in my school was later in my Spanish 3 class, with my favorite orgullosa Latinx teacher. Let me tell you, Profe is probably one of the best Spanish teachers I’ve ever had. We watched movies on famous Latinx people like Selena and Hector Lavoe. Something I love is my cultura. So imagine when you step into class and the objective of the day is on your community. She created a week’s worth of PowerPoints on the Afro-Latinx community. Something I thought would never get to see ‘til I got to college. I remember suddenly feeling like I was enough and in my space. Funny thing is it wasn’t a space that was created based off of what a box said I am. All I can remember was looking at Profe and wanting to tell her thank you for making me and my people matter. All it takes is a simple acknowledgment of our differences and at the moment a sense of healing was created.

What matters to The Protector is not the Spanish subject. In and of itself, Spanish cannot be culturally sustaining, as her disparate experiences with this subject exemplify. What The Protector wants, what Ashantie wants, is to be seen for who she is and to be free to be fully herself in school. When The Protector began to experience for herself more humanizing educational spaces within her school, she partially attributed it to the student-led equity work she was engaging in, whereby she was able to inquire into her observations of school injustices, link her experiences to the perspectives of others, and help create plans to bring about change. Still, it does not escape her that as time goes by in her high school career, she has collected cariño from more of her teachers, like her soccer moms, whose individual actions eventually have woven...
together an indispensable web of love and support. She represents these teachers in her drawing (Figure 1); they are the hands that prop her up in healing from her in-betweenness. While The Protector feels teachers who see her and uplift her are invaluable, she still represents herself in a box because beyond individual teachers, broader systemic change is still needed to shift the school culture to be more culturally sustaining and to dismantle the categories and assumptions imposed on students.

Living in the space between identity categories means we have the power to cross barriers and boundaries, but not through ideas of “mestizaje” that end up being anti-Black (Hernández, 2003) and vanishing Latinx Indigenousities (Saldana-Portillo, 2017). Cultures do not exist in bubbles, and when we try to name cultures as monolithic, we are enacting colonial logics that obscure differences. The official language of education often treats cultures in bounded ways that both homogenize and divide (e.g., a new initiative is for “Black and Latinx students,” as if these groups were as simple as two separately homogenous identities). Latinidades offers room to redefine our personhoods, and to demand and create school spaces that love our hybridities and pluralism. Interrogating the in-betweenness of being Latinx can mean the difference between sustaining pluralism and reifying racism, classism, and other manifestations of hegemony. In-betweenness is where young people can locate their pluralities and transformational brilliance, and where adults can follow their lead to culturally sustaining education.

References


Endnotes

1 To freely use our full linguistic repertoires as writers, we chose not to italicize Spanish words, as would be the convention under APA guidelines. Instead, we center our multilingualism and translanguaging practices in this piece by putting English and Spanish on an equal plane. We recommend this video by Daniel José Older to learn more about our stance on not italicizing non-English words: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24gC3U7m7FM&feature=youtu.be.

2 “Hey, old man!”


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An unwavering commitment to culturally responsive sustaining education & social emotional learning

Dawn Brooks-DeCosta and Ife Lenard

Through an analysis of both SEL and CR-SE practices at an urban school and a social skill building afterschool program conducted through outside support staff, this paper demonstrates the process of providing social-emotional supports with a culturally responsive lens. The authors suggest, without a culturally responsive-sustaining lens, social and emotional supports can lack the trust and connection needed to meet students where they are while acknowledging their unique identities and cultures.

At the Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School (TMALS), an urban elementary school in Harlem NYC, a school leader in collaboration with an afterschool organization, The Meeting House (TMH), focuses on the social skill building of children through recreation, friendship, and community to support children and families holistically, while meeting their social-emotional needs through a culturally responsive approach. The relationship between TMALS and TMH began in 2017. The outside organization sought to support the school's mission and vision through an expansion of learning and social opportunities for the students. An important aspect of the relationship between the school leader and the afterschool social skill program is the involvement of clinical social workers as well as community and volunteer educators and teaching artists. TMALS is a small elementary school with approximately 200 students. Its student body is 97% Black and Brown students and 82% of its students qualify for FRPL. Though its special education population is 25%, its small enrollment size has resulted in a reduced budget and staff designated to meet the needs of these students. The Meeting House Afterschool Program is a nonprofit organization that provides afterschool programming focused on social-emotional learning through recreation and therapy. Paula Resnick, founder and visionary created the program out of a desire to support the vulnerable population of students who were experiencing a loss of social connection, isolation, low self-esteem, social anxiety and bullying in school environments. These students are often framed as loners. However, through a more culturally responsive lens, these students can be valued for the perspectives, gifts, and talents they bring.

Social Worker, professor, and social-emotional learning and restorative practices specialist, Ife Lenard, serves as the Director and liaison between The Meeting House and the Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School. Through music, arts, dance, social-emotional learning, social skill-building activities, games, and a focus on friendship management, the children have the opportunity to experience a sense of belonging and connectedness to each other within their school community. TMALS and TMH targeted the program’s services towards the most vulnerable students, but in the end, ultimately expanded those supports not only to students with special needs, but also to children in the general education population who were in need of social skill building and opportunities to foster belonging, connections, and friendships. The children participating in the program receive services from TMH twice weekly in afterschool from clinical social workers, volunteers, and trained staff. Moreover, this additional staff allows for approximately 25 students to receive small group or one-on-one support during the school day. The children chosen for participation in the program include children who are new to the school, students who have struggled making and sustaining friends, students with special needs, and other students who struggle socially and emotionally. The thoughtful planning and preparation of the clinical social workers as well as the community and volunteer educators includes a deep dive into research-based practices in social-emotional learning and an exploration of perceptions of race that the community educators hold and how those perceptions impact their interactions.
with children of color. This complements the school's mission that focuses on the holistic support of the child, recognizing and celebrating identity while concurrently supporting their social and emotional well-being.

TMALS was founded in 2005 in a collaboration between a historical Harlem organization Abyssinian Development Corporation, New Visions for Public Schools, and the Department of Education. The school was created through the vision of Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts III with a mission of social justice, cultural responsiveness, activism, community, and family. Continuing the vision of the founding principal, Dr. Sean Davenport, the current principal, Dr. Dawn Brooks DeCosta, incorporated social-emotional learning as a key addition to and core value of the school's mission. Through support, study, and self-exploration, community educators and actors participate in a supported ongoing process of learning and analysis of culturally responsive approaches to social-emotional learning. Similar to the day staff, staff working with TMH participate in article and text studies in antiracist training and pedagogy, and racial identity development self-reflective work as preparation for ensuring that students' identities, cultures and voices are honored and included in the work. This allows staff to be supportively guided as they enrich their own understanding and learning while simultaneously building a sense of trust with students through social skill building activities. Through an action research analysis, the authors of this essay, as key participants and leaders in the two organizations, examine both organizations, the context in which they work and the quality and intentionality of the relationship that in turn impacts a school community.

An Urban School Perspective

According to the NYC Opportunity Annual Report released in May 2019, for the past 12 years, New York City's poverty rate has fluctuated between 19-21% (NYC Opportunity Annual Report, 2019). According to New York University Furman Center Core Data from 2011-2015, close to 1.7 million New Yorkers were living in poverty (NYU Furman Center Core Data, 2011-2015). Structural racism plagues Black and Brown communities with disproportionate policing, a criminal justice system that targets them, poor-performing schools, lack of job opportunities and decreased access to higher education. African Americans and Latinos are more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods (New York University Furman Center, 2016). Although gentrification projects sprout throughout New York City with all of its fixings to purchase, renovate, and resell property in order to transform and conform neighborhoods to the standards and aesthetics of middle class status, many Harlem families continue to live below the poverty index at a rate of 25% as compared to the citywide average of 17% (NYU Furman Center, 2018).

Located in the culturally rich neighborhood of Harlem, home of the Harlem Renaissance, TMALS's school community enjoys the wealth of culture, arts and history of Harlem. Among the staff, students, and families there is a strong sense of connectedness and commitment to work as a village to provide the highest quality learning experience as possible. The school's motto, “We are the village that raises the child,” is based on the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child.” The school community prides itself on a commitment among and collaboration between the staff and families to collectively raise the children with a sense of identity, culture, and academic ability as evidenced in their curricula, policies, and practices. As part of the village mission, the school community seeks community and cultural partnerships to enhance the learning experiences of students to interrupt the impact of poverty and systemic racism. TMALS's predominantly Black student body reflects the experiences of Black students in urban schools across the country who experience poverty at a higher rate, as compared to their White counterparts. Art Munin (2012) interrogated the effect of racism on the most marginalized children, citing historic data on race and socio-economic discrimination. The disproportionate poverty rate is an outcome of the systemic racism that exists in communities like Harlem, where historically racist systems and structures in housing, lack of generational wealth, job opportunities and access negatively impact Black and Brown families. Munin noted in his research:

In an equitable society, if Whites constitute 65% of the total population, they should also make up 65% of those in the low-income bracket. But this group is actually 23.6 percentage points lower in representation in
the low-income family category. Conversely, Blacks make up a larger percentage than their overall size in the low-income population by 9.8 percentage points. (pp. 4-5)

The inequity that Munin describes has become even more glaring through the health and economic crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Disparities can also be seen in the educational opportunities for Black and Brown children. Milner (2013), who examined the ways in which poverty can impact Black children in the learning environment, noted, “Inside of school, there are pedagogical approaches that have important implications for students living in poverty—instructional practices that are responsive to the complex needs of them." (p. 2). The poverty levels of Black children in the New York City public school system have historically been quantified according to data obtained through the Free and Reduced Lunch price forms collected yearly by all NYC public schools. The U.S. Department of Education (2001) conducted a study of 71 high-poverty schools in New York City and found that across those schools, students experiencing poverty achieved at lower levels, as compared to those students not living in poverty. Poverty impacts the quality and quantity of resources available to children (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). Studies have shown that there is a concentration of Black and Latino students in high-poverty schools (Saporito & Sohoni, 2007). According to the New York City Department of Education school database, TMALS’s poverty rate is approximately 82% (New York City Department of Education 0SM318 School Quality Guide, 2018-2019). The factors that impact the lives of children and families living in poverty may also decrease their access to effective learning (Evans, 2004).

Poverty also has harmful effects on the physical, social-emotional, mental health and wellness of children and their families. Several researchers (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Garo, Allen-Handy, & Lewis, 2018; Bowman, Comer, & Johns, 2018) noted the factors that exist in the lives of children living in racism and poverty that include more punitive parenting strategies, physical illness, high stress, violence, crime, substance abuse, and single-parent homes. The negative side effects of systemic racism and disparity in adequate schooling and employment, despite families’ desire to provide for their children, places an undue financial strain on their lives. To further compound these challenges, the stress levels that poverty places on families and their children can impact the ability of parents to attend to the needs of their children.

The prolonged, unjust realities of historical and generational poverty often propel families to seek safe havens for their children. For some, school has long been a temporary shelter away from the realities of oppression and poverty for children. In order to combat the effects of stress and emotional strain on the students, staff and families at TMALS actively interrupt systemically racist policies and practices. TMALS creates daily social emotional experiences rooted in culturally responsive practices that provide the members of the community with ways to identify, express and validate emotions, assert voice and agency in managing emotions, and practice self-care. Through a culture of care, the school encourages all members of the school community to listen to and attend to the needs of others while practicing daily strategies of mindfulness. Mindfulness practice has been proven effective particularly in African American communities in helping mitigate stress related health challenges (Woods-Giscombé, & Gaylord, 2014). TMH, in collaboration with TMALS’s mission, seeks to build a sense of connectedness and belonging through engaging social skill building activities, arts, music, community and restorative circles all through a social emotional needs lens. Because of TMALS’s commitment to CR-SE, TMH worked to develop their staff and approaches to include cultural responsiveness as a way to connect with students through the celebration and value of their identities. TMALS students experience a curriculum that centers their identity through text, historical perspectives, and a culturally responsive approach that encourages their voice. Part of TMALS’s mission towards a holistic approach to learning understands and seeks to address the individual needs of students. The collaboration with TMH allowed TMALS to support students who experience challenges with making friends, regulating negative emotions and building connections with teachers and peers. TMALS’s focus on...
family engagement and support aligns with TMH’s inclusion of parents in the process of addressing the needs of the children. Students selected for the program are based on staff recommendation as well as by parent request. This school-family approach allows all those caring for the children at school and at home to collaborate in the design of programming that best meets their needs.

Why Social and Emotional Learning Matters?

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), once commonly referred to as “soft skills,” has more recently been acknowledged as essential non-cognitive skills that are needed in higher education and the workplace (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). In addition to academic and cognitive abilities, character, personality, and social skills are key to the success of the individual and the collective (Wagenheim, 2016). SEL is therefore a worthy and needed investment in preparing students to become collaborative citizens who contribute positively to their communities and the world. Social Emotional Learning has a direct impact on a student’s physical, mental, and academic development (Cherniss et al., 2006). Researcher James Comer began his work in the 1960s examining the effects of building relationships on academic achievement and ultimately created a process for conducting SEL work. The Comer Process (1996) fosters and nurtures positive relationships between students, educators, and parents, and that in turn positively impact the learning experiences of students. SEL is also built on the findings in the research on Emotional Intelligence. The ability of students to recognize and identify emotions, regulate emotions when necessary, show compassion, exhibit positive relationships with others, and make well informed decisions in challenging situations are skills identified as Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 2007). Further, Emotional Intelligence (EI) is defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and explained by Brackett and Rivers (2014) as the “mental abilities associated with processing and responding to emotions, including recognizing the expression of emotions in others, using emotions to enhance thinking, and regulating emotions to drive effective behaviors” (p. 4). Students who experience the effects of poverty, trauma, and systemic racism can benefit from a social emotional approach that allows them to identify their emotions and the emotions of others, and practice strategies that help them regulate and manage emotions towards positive outcomes. SEL work in the classroom allows for validation of emotions and feelings, which can strengthen the self-esteem and positive self-concept of students. For example, TMALS students were able to engage in a lesson analyzing the many moods experienced by activists historically and currently and the need for them to utilize feelings such as anger, oppression, and rage towards designing a strategy for change. The many moods an activist may experience from pain, to sorrow, to fury and at the same time, a feeling of joy and a calling shows a clear example of how all feelings are valid and have purpose.

Students who receive SEL support showed enhanced positive relationships with peers, decreased aggressive behavior and poor decision making, decreased disciplinary action needed, and received fewer suspensions, compared to their peers who do not receive SEL support (Rivers, Brackett, Salovey, & Mayer, 2007). Students with increased SEL are also more likely to enjoy school and attend more regularly. Moreover, knowing students well and utilizing SEL with knowledge of the experiences and lives of the students allows educators to more accurately interpret and contextualize student behaviors. Educators can cause further damage to students when their perceptions of race impede their ability to determine whether students’ behavior is justified or reasonable within a specific context (Ford, 2020). Cherniss et al. (2006) also found that children who were exposed to more social and emotional supports had increased achievement in academics.

The Meeting House program and TMALS’s SEL approach are both informed by The CASEL Framework (2017). The CASEL Framework (2017), a framework for social emotional learning, features elements that include Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making, and Relationship Skills as key components of what they consider a well-rounded comprehensive approach to SEL. Knowledge of self is important in SEL and the ability to self-reflect in the management of one’s emotions. According to the CASEL Framework (2017), Self-Awareness includes the ability to “identify emotions,” hold an “accurate self-perception, recognize one’s strengths, possess self-confidence and self-efficacy.” The next key skill in the CASEL
The current need for SEL in the midst of a pandemic, distance and blended learning, uncertainty, fear, grief, trauma, racial unrest, and stress is particularly high. Many are recognizing that SEL is as essential and crucial as academic learning in this current climate. Students cannot effectively learn in a state of trauma, and teachers concurrently cannot teach to the best of their abilities while experiencing trauma. SEL seeks to provide the supports that students, staff, and families need to be their best selves in the midst of stress and trauma. Again, educators must consider the cultural context when applying social-emotional approaches.

Dena Simmons (2019) explains that, “Eurocentric values and content dominate U.S. schooling, so these reflection questions are also relevant to educators of color who may have internalized negative messages about Black or Brown people” (p. 2). She also warns against using SEL to control students’ behavior, stating that in this way, SEL can become, “White supremacy with a hug” (Simmons, 2019). Relevant to the current climate of protest against racial violence, in her 2019 article, “Why We Can’t Afford...
Whitewashed SEL,” she describes the effects of racial violence on young Black and Brown children and the need for educators to engage students in work around their emotions with special attention to their life experiences so as not to further traumatize them. Simmons’ view illustrates and encourages that SEL frameworks such as the CASEL Framework (2017) continue to evolve to include the cultural responsiveness required in SEL work.

The Need for a Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Approach

Killman, Saxton, and Serpa (1986) defined culture as “shared philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes and norms that knit a community together” (p. 89). Siddle-Walker (2009) argued that Black schools employed cultural relevance before the historical precedent case Brown v. Board of Education (1954). She described the wholesome care and advocacy that represented their culturally responsive ways of being. Black educators taught with excellence and focused on civics and responsibility, while serving as role models for the community. She also described the Black educators and leaders dating back to the 1930s, who exercised a level of care and attention to the emotional well-being of Black children by engaging families to advocate for the needs of the children in a time of blatant and violent acts of racism. The reinforcements of such racist systems and beliefs can thwart the optimal development of one's social-emotional self; Siddle-Walker's emphasis on the “aspirational” and “interpersonal” care of Black educators highlighted the necessary armor required to thwart the very penetrating effects of racism onto Black children. Her emphasis on this “ethic of care” idea reflected how teachers would help students “see past where they could see,” in terms of their own beliefs about their own ability to succeed. Institutional care and its alignment with interpersonal care demonstrate the idea that there must be alignment between philosophy and practice for the benefit of the children (Siddle-Walker, 2009). Much can be learned from this era of Black schools by identifying ways in which modern schools can and must reclaim the focus on care and advocacy that many Black educators emanated before desegregation.

One culturally relevant approach follows a framework designed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), based on her research around what she coined culturally relevant pedagogy. The three major areas include a focus on “Academic Success, Cultural Competence and Critical Consciousness” (p. 160-162). Dedicated, invested teachers who believe and know that “all students can and must succeed” are essential to this approach (p. 163). Through the use of culturally relevant texts and culturally competent lesson planning, Ladson-Billings explained that teachers can use the culture of the students as “a vehicle for learning” where parents and family members are also engaged to participate and share their “cultural knowledge” (p. 161). Ladson-Billings noted that “students must develop a broader socio-political consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” and “engage the world and others critically” (p. 162).

Dr. A. Wade Boykin, a psychologist and scholar focused on Black child development and their academic learning in American society, conducted a series of experimental studies, which showed that African American fourth and fifth graders saw higher performance when they engaged in what he called “communal learning” (p. 379). The connectedness that students experience in relationship building in a supportive environment directly and positively impacts their academic success. Social-emotional learning allows for the connections that students can build with each other in a learning environment that creates a sense of belonging. CR-SE additionally builds connections through the recognition and sharing of real-world identity, experiences and culture. C. D. Lee (2001), another leader in the psychology of Black children illustrated in her work the concept of “cultural modeling” as a way to connect the students’ everyday experiences and knowledge with academic content. In addition, Tillman (2008) explained how Dr. Hilliard:

argued that people of African descent must know their culture, schools must recognize and include African culture.
in instructional materials, teachers and leaders must have high levels of cultural proficiency and African American communities must use their culture as a foundation in the academic and social development of its children. (p. 600)

There is an important connection to be made between SEL and CRSE because social-emotional awareness can surface in contexts that are unique to the cultural characteristics of the students. For example, Hammond and Jackson (2015) and Muhammad (2018) included skill-based instruction centered on intellectualism through challenging content as a part of their definition of a culturally responsive approach. Their approach is more aligned with Geneva Gay’s (2018) definition: “using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (p. 29). This definition attends to the intellectual needs of the students, while also addressing the need for an identity-centered focus. Hammond and Jackson (2015) went further to identify “affirmation and validation” as part of their Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching. They noted in the Framework the need for building a “sense of self efficacy, positive mindset, reducing social emotional stress, providing care and a push, building a socially and intellectually safe environment and using a restorative justice frame” (p. 17). Paris and Alimi’s (2018) work detailing CRSE goals describe what they call a “loving critique” of historical educational practices of Black and Brown children and the ways in which we must practice “asset pedagogies” which “allow us to see the fallacy of measuring ourselves and the young people in our communities solely against the White middle-class norms of knowing and being that continue to dominate notions of educational achievement” (p. 85-86).

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2018) studied literacy in a historically Black context, examining the ways in which literacy was taught to Black students pre-Brown v. Board of Ed that promoted a stronger and deeper learning and understanding for Black students. As Muhammad noted, “Youths need opportunities in literacy pedagogy not only to explore multiple facets of self-identity but also to learn about the identities of others who are different from them” (p. 138). She upheld the need to return to a framework that includes identity and criticality focused not only on individual identities, but on collective identities as well. In Muhammad’s text Cultivating Geniuses (2020), she outlines her “historically responsive literacy model,” a “four layered equity model” that details the needed elements in curriculum and lesson design that values and centers the lives and experiences of Black and Brown students in their everyday learning. The four layers include Identity, Skills, Criticality, and Intellectualism (Muhammad, 2020). Identity as Muhammad (2020) describes it is, “composed of notions of who we are, who others say we are and whom we desire to be” (p. 67). Skills and “proficiencies” she defines as “denoting competence, ability, and expertise” as it relates to the area of study (p. 85). Intellectualism by her definition, is “what we learn or understand about various topics, concepts, and paradigms” (p. 104). Finally, criticality “helps teachers understand and explain inequities in education and is a step towards anti-oppression” (p. 117). This approach, utilized by the teachers of TMALS who were trained by Dr. Muhammad, cultivates students’ excellence and genius.

Racial identity development builds a strong sense of self that is shaped over time by experiences. Yolanda Sealey Ruiz’s (2009, 2011, 2013) work shows the relational ways educators can lift and value the lives and everyday experiences of Black students to enhance their connections to learning through multiple literacies. Sealey-Ruiz (2009), in her work with culturally relevant curriculum, argued that, “our culture is an intrinsic part of who we are and how we identify ourselves. It molds our experiences and how we interpret those defining moments in our lives” (p. 58). If living within a society that stereotypes groups of people, most often people of color, in negative ways, then it is important to have a foundational, strength-based racial identity development approach for children. Culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy also affords children long-lasting racial identity development over time. This teaching and learning is incremental, scaffolded and woven into curricula, school culture and relationships. It is not linear but rather circular, meaning that children can go in and out of stages of development, returning to an old way of thinking or remaining in one particular stage for a long period of time. Hence with multiple entry points, schools can build a framework where children take pride
What a Social Emotional and Culturally Responsive Program Looks Like in Afterschool?

Having a partnership with an afterschool program that has a mission akin to that of the school is purposeful and non-negotiable. The consistent planning and collaboration between TMALS and TMH is a model of an effective and intentional relationship. TMALS chose to collaborate with TMH, a program aligned with CR-SE, to provide a unique platform of play during extended learning time that cocoons children in enrichment and recreation activities in concert with therapeutic support. In determining the needs of the students, TMALS and TMH were purposeful in customizing the approach based on individual student life stories and experiences in school. The TMH process features a combination of play, emotional intelligence, and socialization skill building that helps children blossom personally and build meaningful friendships. The TMH staff engages the TMALS students in a variety of experiences that allow for the development of socialization skills. As in the TMH approach, friendships and relationships are both a key in SEL and CR-SE—the ways that we connect in supportive collaboration with one another. Lead staff prioritize professional development of the adults who are supporting the children. The ongoing thoughtful development of staff is key to the success of the activities and connections built with the students. Legette, Rogers, and Warren (2020) note the importance of the educator as social-emotional “focal agents in rehumanizing Black students in an education system predicated on their dehumanization” (p. 2). Examining race, perspectives, beliefs, and the impact on practice is a key part of the professional development of TMH staff. Clinical social workers guide staff through daily sessions with students and debriefing protocols. TMH engages children fully in play, while simultaneously weaving in aspects of therapy into recreational group activities. Helping children foster relationships with their peers and learning friendship management is an intricate process and the premise of this afterschool program. Being able to enhance a child’s resilience and self-concept and provide liberated space for creative expression; sports and games offers gentle and enriched experiences (Vandell, 2013). TMH’s program was designed to cultivate opportunities for children to develop a variety of SEL skills in the context of a diverse community of teaching artists and educators. This afterschool team relies heavily on collaborative communication and directs their efforts toward an individual child’s goals for enhanced skill development. Such an interdisciplinary approach, focused on socialization and communication goals, provides coordinated activities that allows children practice, time, and space to utilize skills and learning in real time. Through art projects, role play, music, chorus, creativity, crafts, games, etc., students collaborate, connect, and problem solve while building friendships. Hale (1982) notes the affective cognitive style of Black children and the environments where they thrive being more engaging integrated with arts, music, and human interaction. This active reinforcement, guided by an integrated professional team, positively impacts a child’s social and emotional development. A key to the success of the partnership greatly depended on how intentional and thoughtful both organizations were towards their commitment in keeping the students’ needs at the center. The comprehensive approach to the TMALS and TMH included the following:

- Getting to Know One Another Well
  - Leadership walkthroughs/Inter-visitation of both programs
  - Classroom visits and observations/school and partner program

- Leadership conversations with staff and students from both programs
  - Identifying Key Lead Staff/Enlisting Experts/Specialists
  - Partner and school identify key staff from both school and partnering organization to best lead the work
  - Determine a liaison between school and partnering organization

- Getting to Know the Families
  - Partnering organization information sessions with families
  - Surveys of interest for families

In their racial group identity within an entire school community with cohesive messaging for positive racial pride.
• Conducting a Needs Assessment
  ○ Partnering organization gathers information on the school’s needs
  ○ Communication between partner leadership, school leader and key school staff
  ○ Identification of students for the program and individual student needs

• Creating Programming and Logistics
  ○ Designing a program that meets the needs of the population
  ○ Introduce support staff to school wide expectations and culture
  ○ Ensure schedule is planned, activities, transitions, etc. with school staff

• Adapt as needed and maintain flexibility
  ○ Professional Development and Ongoing Learning for Staff
  ○ Building trust & creating a safe space for learning

• Training for support staff and volunteers in SEL and CRSE
  ○ Ongoing article, text study, and discussion using protocols
  ○ Racial identity development and examination of perceptions of race and culture

• Debrief sessions after each class to determine successes, challenges, and adaptations

• Maintaining consistent and transparent communication between school, partner, & families
  ○ As challenges and new information arises, ensure constant flow of communication, problem solving and adaptation

Maintaining Emotional Connection During Physical Distancing

Unexpectedly in March 2020, all NYC public schools were closed due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and students were transitioned to distance learning. In an effort to continue to support the school’s students and families, the day and afterschool organizations transitioned with the students and families into a virtual environment. The transition for families into a distance learning environment required devices for students, WiFi for families who previously did not have access, troubleshooting and supporting families who have varying levels of technology ability, as well as managing the stress and trauma of living in a global pandemic. Recognizing the need for a social-emotional approach to supporting families, the staff at both TMALS and TMH utilized the work of leading scholars in antiracist pedagogy, CRSE, and SEL to develop the transition to online learning with the goal of providing the same culture of care that families were accustomed to, during in-person learning. In the midst of the pandemic, students and families experienced additional trauma after the public murder of George Floyd at the knees of a police officer. The Harlem community, a community familiar with police violence against Black bodies, felt the pain of the George Floyd murder and were impacted by two other recent murders and the remnants of countless others. Now burdened by twin pandemics, along came the impounding realities of economic strain caused by loss of employment, health and in some cases life, the need for support for families intensified. TMALS had to increase supports beyond social emotional learning and culturally responsive practices to securing food pantry locations for families, daily breakfast and lunch for students, as well as trauma and grief supports. The staff at TMH concurrently worked to help support adults, teachers, parents, and community members in processing the trauma of the pandemic as well as the racial unrest that resulted in mass protests across NYC and worldwide. Zaretta Hammond (2020) delivered a webinar, “Moving Beyond the Packet: Creating More Culturally Responsive Distance Learning Experiences,” sharing the message that distance learning opportunities should be a chance to focus on the more affective cognitive aspects of learning, where educators can offer more real world culturally responsive, engaging learning opportunities rooted in the social justice of the moment. Major (2020) outlined the opportunity for more independent, project-based learning with increased opportunities for student voice and agency. To that end, TMH continued its collaboration with TMALS through an interactive self-paced website featuring online versions of the socialization skill-building activities students were accustomed to.
The students who participated previously with the afterschool social skill building program were the most vulnerable: students with social skill building challenges, students who were new to the school, students with special needs. Many special needs students struggled with the distance learning format, needing more of a physical connection and proximity to their teachers. During the pandemic, these students experienced increased anxiety and feelings of isolation among a variety of barriers and successes with distance learning. Distance learning in many ways forced innovation and learning for both organizations. When the school abruptly transitioned into full remote learning at the beginning of the rise of the pandemic in NYC, TMH also shifted its focus to supporting another vulnerable group in the school community that needed immediate support by offering: "Parenting Through the Pandemic," a weekly series of evening support sessions with parents, which parents came to see as a lifeline. A parent participating in the parent support group shared, "I'm trying to do my best with the kids. I honestly joined the parent group because it's my only socialization with other adults, and other parents that have become family to me. I have learned from it, and it helps me hear coping strategies and manage. I really appreciate it because I feel alone here dealing with all of this." Brown, Doom, Pena, Watamura and Koppels (2020) find that many parents experienced a feeling of isolation and anxiety as a direct or indirect reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of these crises, the two organizations have maintained their relationship through the pandemic and their commitment to the community. TMH continues to exercise its profound commitment to intentional spaces, service-leadership, and building relationships for New York City children and families in a different, more human way. In late Spring 2020 as local, national, and global protests grew, they also began to engage the wider community in a series of weekly town hall conversations about race-centered research and training, antiracist practices and white fragility. Both TMALS and TMH have an unwavering commitment that Black and Brown families and their children are worthy, divine, and beautiful, and it is for that reason alone that CR-SE and emotional intelligence remain at the forefront of their collective work. As the pandemic continues, this partnership between TMALS and TMH provides a source of holistic consistency in the midst of confusion and upheaval, support in a time of fear, and a culture of care that has become a survival mechanism for a school community striving to emerge with their mental, emotional, cultural and physical health intact.

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Commentaries on Urban Education

Reshma Ramkellawan-Arteaga

The Struggle

This essay identifies some of the challenges staff development providers may encounter and identifies ways to approach the work to ensure the greatest impact on students. This includes clearly defining the boundaries and permeability of the work, looking for various entry points, and explicitly addressing adults’ mindsets. For teacher educators who support teachers and administrators looking to dismantle or challenge white supremacy in schools, the work can feel overwhelming but, through deliberate strategies, the work is always possible.

Near the end of the first stanza in his song, “The Struggle,” Afro-Caribbean artist Bunji Garlin (2019) says, “The incorrect part of speech could make yuh end up inna d Gulf of Paria” (0:44 - 0:45). A skillful lyricist and musician who crosses multiple genres, most notably soca (modern Calypso music) and reggae, Garlin layers his lyrics with allusions, couplets, and assonance. His songs often capture the complexity of finding one’s space and place in contexts that prioritize white-dominant narratives. The quoted lyric captures a contradiction I’ve often seen when working with groups of teachers, administrators, and educational support staff; Garlin wants to express himself in a particular way, but if he uses “incorrect” English when speaking to someone in power, he risks getting in trouble, perhaps even killed. Educators, especially educators of color, want to orient themselves towards Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) practices but are confined to white supremacist standards for learning, pedagogy, and how to “do” school. Developing ways to negotiate that tension has been a driving force in my work as a teacher educator.

I am a first-generation American and a woman of color. I’ve made the commitment to habitually speak from and about my experiences and purposefully center students when working with schools. Administrators at School “A” need a system to create quality assessments? Great! How will we make connections to students’ lives in meaningful, and not just superficial, ways? How will we ensure the tasks reflect a wide breadth of talents? Teacher teams at School “B” need help analyzing data? No problem! How will we ensure these numbers are never disassociated from names and faces? How will we use asset-based language to infer what students know versus what they don’t? How will we adult ensure we are educating towards what can be, not to what was? I model what it looks like to embody the philosophy and advocate for student voice in everything I do with educators, including asking lots of questions that challenge the white supremacy of schools.

I’ve found, through trial and error, that one subversive way of challenging the white-centric norms of school is to bring every conversation back to CR-SE practices and pedagogy. I consistently, almost repetitively, ask questions related to CR-SE even when the conversation is about something else. If expectations come up, I ask questions like, “Who sets these expectations? Why are they mandated? What purpose do they serve? Which students do they serve?” Same for other topics like homework, assessments, or reading logs. I’ve learned that the process of engaging schools and their constituents, especially those comfortable with white-centric norms, requires profound adjustments in:

• understanding the nuances of CR-SE
• considering the implications for authentic execution in the context of standardization
• addressing white supremacy
• confronting the smog (Tatum, 2017) educators implicitly espouse
• legitimizing and prioritizing student voices

In this article, I share how I navigate supporting the use of CR-SE and how my professional struggles have helped me understand the critical need to focus on adults’ mindsets and the actions they take as a way to bring about sustainable, foundational change.

Stepping into the Struggle by Defining the Boundaries of My Work

Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz often talks about Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) as “doing the work.” To engage in “the work,” it is imperative to create
student-centered spaces that affirm students' linguistic, cultural, and racial identities from an asset-based standpoint (Kirkland, 2014; Paris, 2012). The affirmation of these identity attributes acknowledges the legitimacy and value said elements bring to the classroom. When I step into a school as a professional development provider who is a woman of color, I share my mental models and establish boundaries that are non-negotiable in my work with educators, regardless of their role or level of interactions with children. I maintain:

- We should love students but refrain from trying to save them. We need to see and respect students' full humanity (Love, 2019).
- We will validate and affirm students' lives even when systems and structures make it challenging to do so.
- We will support and encourage students to question rules and routines and treat student resistance to tasks or work as more than misbehavior and have a ready answer to the question, “why do I need to learn/do this?”
- We will select and design curricular materials that provide students with “windows, mirrors, and sliding doors” (Bishop, 1990) as well as a variety of ways of expressing their understanding of the content (Lalor, 2016).
- We will conceptualize equity as being more than success on externally-mandated, standardized tests and exams.
- Educators have a moral obligation, especially white educators, to confront systems that emphasize and prioritize white supremacy.
- We trust students to identify how their voices create affirming spaces.
- We view students as co-conspirators and collaborators; we show and tell them teachers do not hold all the knowledge and power.
- We all possess and should act on, our socio-political consciousness. That is, we all have critical thinking, skills, and community-grounded capital to act on societal problems and issues (Seider, et al., 2017).
- Critical pedagogy is responsive pedagogy.
- Codes of power (Delpit, 1997) are helpful but not at the expense of assimilation and identity homicide. One should not silence him/her/their selves at the expense of belonging to a society that does not value authenticity.

My boundaries for doing the work of CR-SE are shaped by the research and literature and informed by my own experiences as a student and educator that were minoritized by the American school system. American public education emerged from a need to serve the non-disabled sons of men with access to power and I see one of my professional responsibilities as a teacher educator to name and describe a supremacist ideology that uses education as a vehicle for maintaining the status quo. When I model for teachers how to question our decisions, they can do the same for students.

**Stepping into the Struggle by Recognizing Who Holds Power**

As a former teacher, and now a parent, I encourage children to stay true to themselves. I am painfully aware, though, that for children to gain access to institutions that further stimulate intellectual and social growth, they must do school in a way that may conflict with who they are as a person. They must use the “incorrect part of speech” to avoid negative consequences (Garlin, 2019, 0:44). American public education has little tolerance for differences and seems to hold little regard for students’ eclectic skills and talents, despite generations of children who have struggled within its parameters. Recognizing that the language that is prioritized, codified, and emphasized is an academic one that has little regard for students’ authentic selves is key. Furthermore, we must acknowledge how educational policies and practices such as mandated standardized tests and seat time requirements have capitalized on supremacist notions to mandate what’s worth learning.

School reform advocates, such as E.D. Hirsch, assert that instruction has become romanticized. According to Hirsch (2006), teachers and schools of education need to provide students with the skills and exposure necessary to become critical thinkers like those of the Enlightenment period. Hirsch does not explicitly reject the idea of including non-mainstream literature (e.g., Afrofuturism) in school, but believes that teaching students the mechanical aspects of literacy are crucial to their learning experiences. This sentiment is reminiscent of the claims found in *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The argument is that such instruction allows students to attain an equitable playing field. In practice though, centering American education traditions, such
as the canon, delegitimizes cultural modes of thinking that present as other in the face of white supremacy.

In addition to understanding the language that operates in schools, students don’t experience the same level of autonomy within the system. My work allows me to toggle between schools with large and small populations of historically marginalized students. I’ve worked with well-resourced schools with predominantly white student bodies and schools with limited resources and predominantly Brown and Black students. In most cases, however, the faculty is overwhelmingly white. These experiences have allowed me to witness firsthand how the rules of school can be bent based on a student’s, or their parent’s, access to power. As an example, a small, mostly white, district in northeast New York State has created a work-around for the state exams that allows children to pursue courses of interest or take advanced courses without prerequisite courses. Teachers are discouraged from teaching to the test and instead are given the necessary tools needed to design complex and authentic tasks such as auto-ethnographies. Meanwhile, high school students just 40 miles south in the Bronx take several different Regents exams, often multiple times. They are unable to graduate without passing a minimum number of assessments. In those schools, teachers tell me they want to provide authentic assessment but feel beholden to state exams.

Stepping into the work of CR-SE in the suburban New York district means that when I’m working with teachers, regardless of the content or topic, I advocate for centering marginalized voices or provide ways for the mostly white teaching faculty to reflect on their racial identities and how it impacts their pedagogy. In the Bronx school, I help teachers address dual goals: teaching children the academic knowledge they need to pass the exam and providing units that feed their intellectual curiosity (Hammond, 2014). The more willing we are to describe those differences and talk openly about power with students and adults, the more likely we are to move the work of CR-SE forward.

**Confronting the Language of the Struggle**

The New York State high school exit exams emerged from a push in the late-1800s to standardize education across the state. Every five to ten years, in each of the various subject areas, the State Education Department has adopted, revised, or updated outcome expectations, described as the New York State Learning Standards. In each iteration, content shaped by the mostly white, mostly male, mostly non-disabled school leaders has informed the demands placed on students and teachers. This white, ableist, hetero-normative curriculum does not account for the nuances that present in educative topics and the lives of its learners. If anything, it prioritizes and further empowers voices that have been a part of the dominant narrative. It also leverages an elitist perspective on what constitutes appropriate educational experiences.

Take, for example, a sixth grade New York State Next Generation English Language Arts standard adopted in 2017:

[D]etermine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings. Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning, tone, and mood, including words with multiple meanings. (6.R.4)

Implicitly, students are told that their interpretation is not accurate unless it reflects a larger understanding of the author’s craft. Even a cursory review of most schools’ curriculum shows patterns around which authors are considered worthy of craft analysis.

Following the latest rounds of revisions to the Learning Standards, NYS education leaders collaborated with luminaries in the field (Paris, Sealey-Ruiz, Kirkland, Ladson-Billings, etc.) to create a framework for CR-SE that was finalized in January 2018. The framework includes four pillars that, if actualized, would make a place where student voice is non-negotiable. The four pillars are:

1. A welcome and affirming environment
2. High expectations and rigorous instruction
3. Inclusive curriculum and assessment
4. Ongoing professional learning for adults aligned with the tenets of CR-SE.

The fact the CR-SE standards exist makes me hopeful. The intense focus on the Learning Standards via state-mandated tests and exams, though, makes me fear we’ll never operationalize them. Absent accountability measures, the framework becomes more of a suggestion and less of a mandate to aspire to, thereby prompting the concern that CR-SE
I ask questions like, “Who sets these expectations? Why are they mandated? What purpose do they serve? Which students do they serve?”

will eventually become a peripheral thought for those who are not immensely invested. The implication is again that technical, white-dominant knowledge that’s assessed on the Regents exams is what is most worthy of students’ time and energy. Several years ago, I sat on a call with a district administrator outside the capital region of New York. When explaining the importance of CR-SE to the district’s goals, the administrator replied, “No, thanks. Our priority is only on curriculum design and assessment.” In that moment I was unable to find the words to persuade her that quality, engaging curricula simply won’t happen without embracing CR-SE.

Leaning Fully into the Struggle

I remain optimistic because I know it’s possible to work within the system while challenging white-dominant ideology to ensure students are truly centered in schools. Adults committed to CR-SE can do that by considering the connection of the skill in relation to culture and reflecting on:

- What is the real-world relationship between the skill and my students’ lives?
- How does the standard or skill dismantle supremacist practices?
- In what ways will my practice need to change?
- What asset-based language is needed?

Using the example of standard 6.R.4, and keeping in mind these questions, we can reconceptualize the standard as:

*Students can use their social and linguistic background to examine the language used by an author in a text. Using their linguistic funds of knowledge analysis of the text's terminology should reflect a personalized understanding of the concepts of mood, tone, and theme.*

If differences between the author’s methodology and student practice arise, space should be afforded to reconcile the two. In re-structuring the standard, the emphasis is placed on student voice in the interpretation of the concept. Coupled with this, there is attention on explicitly including students’ socio-linguistic heritage – a key attribute for literary analysis (Rosenblatt, 1995) and one that ensures that students can be producers of knowledge.

One could argue that New York State has an ethical responsibility for holding all districts responsible for the implementation of the CR-SE framework across districts and that until they do, we’ll continue to see the disparities as we do between Putnam County and the Bronx. Studies have shown that students of all ethnic, social, racial, and economic backgrounds benefit from responsive educational practices (Denson & Chang, 2009). Yet, district leaders are given different degrees of slack to pick and choose when or how they will attend to it. We then must persuade school leaders the impetus is on them.

Teachers as the Vehicle for Supremacy

One of the most insidious statements I’ve heard educators make is “I don’t think about kids and their cultures because I see them as the person in front of me. I see them for who they are.” Similar in intent to “I don’t see color,” it discounts all that students bring to the classroom with them. When I am working with a majority white staff, I start by attending to their mindsets. Anecdotally, the most difficult aspect of changing adults’ perspectives is getting them to acknowledge their biases and deficit thinking mental models. Practice indicates that offering educators a rubric, a familiar tool as they likely use them with their students, to assess their mindset can serve as a self-assessment and facilitation tool. Table 1 highlights the most common archetypes I’ve experienced and descriptive attributes. In my experience, an educator’s willingness to implement CR-SE is contingent on where they are along this spectrum. This table is often used as a reference for sorting and creating experiences based on the perceived mindset of educators. When working with schools, preliminary conversations with administrators, teachers, and students in tandem with this spectrum provide context for the most appropriate professional development interventions.

Curriculum and standards aside, schools are designed to perpetuate specific modes of inequity (e.g. producers vs. consumers, blue-collar vs. white-collar laborers, etc.). Educators in these spaces can choose to perpetuate ideas that reinforce the narrative students need to ascribe
Commentaries on Urban Education

Commentaries on Urban Education

to white dominant ideology to be successful in a paternalistic, capitalist environment. Or they can disrupt the narrative and help students do the same. Educators can move along this spectrum by engaging in continuous reflection and introspection. Coincidentally, this skill is emphasized in teacher education programs but appears to disappear as teachers advance in their careers. Table 2 offers a series of strategies teacher educators can use to help adjust the mindsets of resistant and emergent teachers. This table can be used in tandem with Table 1 as it offers specific strategies for addressing racist pedagogy.

By no means does a shift in ideology and mindset occur in a matter of days. The process can often take years. When faced with systems that feel impossible to maneuver, the endeavor is daunting. It is essential to be persistent and hold teachers accountable for their responsibility to CR-SE and equity in schools. My responsibility as a teacher educator is to provide a way forward and I’ve found the most reliable, consistent, and the best first step is the simplest: ask the students.

Table 1. Culturally Responsive Spectrum for Teacher Mindset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resistant</th>
<th>Emergent</th>
<th>Activist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educators in this category are typically passive-aggressive or blatantly aggressive in their disregard for CR-SE.</td>
<td>Educators in this category are just beginning to lift the smog that has influenced their practice. They believe in CR-SE but are either unsure of how to implement or still prioritize oppressive white dominant ideology</td>
<td>Activist educators are those who intentionally create classroom spaces that question and challenge the status quo; social justice is core to their educational philosophy. The activist educator is not one who encourages students to do school to obtain a job. They encourage students to disrupt - even while in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uses coded language, phrases, or terminology to engage in racist dialogue.</td>
<td>• Attends to surface layer culture (e.g., the inclusion of music, good, dance, etc. in the curriculum).</td>
<td>• Uses intentional and purposeful co-generative dialogue (Emdin, 2016) to reflect and promote student voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Blames students, or assumes students have deficits that hinder their learning.</td>
<td>• Sees culture as an engagement tool, rather than a means for authentic learning.</td>
<td>• Continuously reflects on and adjusts language use for instances of white supremacy. Calls in others when they use deficit language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Limited reflection on their practice; hesitant to engage in discourse.</td>
<td>• Prioritizes assimilation to white dominant codes of education. Typically emphasizes codes of power (Delphit, 1997) as a method to perpetuate existing power structures.</td>
<td>• Intentionally seeks to learn more about students’ cultures and the implications for their way of being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Defensive when questioned on associated behaviors.</td>
<td>• Attempts to build a rapport and articulate a love for students but may unintentionally dehumanize students or set themselves up as a savior.</td>
<td>• Conscientiously works towards equity and social justice in their personal life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dehumanizes self or those in school (it’s just a job).</td>
<td>• For people of color, in particular, education is seen as a means for pulling oneself up.</td>
<td>• Integrates constructs such as grit and bootstrapping; considers students’ contexts and systemic inequality (Love, 2019).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Subscribes to the banking ideology (Freire, 1971).</td>
<td>• Their teaching mirrors how they were taught.</td>
<td>• Uses love-based pedagogy to validate and affirm students.</td>
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Ask the students – Releasing Power Back to the People

“Why are we trying to bring culture to the classroom when it is already there?” – Matthew Romano, a graduate student at the City College of New York.

At the time this manuscript was written, COVID-19 was ravaging New York City and similarly dense regions across the country. Black and brown communities decimated by systemic racist practices (e.g. gentrification,
white flight, food deserts, etc.) have seen the highest rates of mortality. Amongst the chaos, educators have been working to create learning spaces that attended to students’ social, emotional, and cultural needs. Almost without exception, activist teachers all started with the same initial step: They asked their students what they needed.

Dialogue with students is a low stakes way to begin shifting to a responsive pedagogy. There are three immediate opportunities to engage students in dialogue: feedback, instructional planning, and problems of practice. Table 3 offers an overview of these domains and the various questions one can pose to students to begin the conversational process. Note that the guiding questions were composed in response to the framework offered in Emdin’s (2016) *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood*.

As a professional developer and professor, I frequently engage in collaborative or co-generative dialogues with my constituents. The feedback and information garnered yields a dynamic, dialogical shift in learning practices because the individuals I support feel valued and heard. When I encounter particularly resistant teachers, I often engage their students in a co-generative dialogue to provide the teacher with feedback. The feedback typically addresses misconstrued ideas about the teacher’s efficacy as a responsive educator. Hearing straightforward feedback from students can be challenging but after working through the process, teachers are more likely to see them as co-conspirators in the fight against white supremacy and less like passive participants, just doing school.

**Conclusion**

Had Bunji Garlin (2019) released “The Struggle” while I was in the classroom, I would use the song to teach my students about allusions. I would have to weigh the pros and cons of bringing in text to self-connections about their Caribbean heritage, the references to prominent landmarks of Trinidad and Tobago, and perhaps even emphasize how one might codeswitch the analysis of the song. If I chose the assimilationist pedagogy path and focused on a close read, I would miss the opportunity to explore the migration of people

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**Table 2: Adjusting Mindsets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supporting Resistant Teachers</th>
<th>Supporting Emergent Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Listen intently for language that implies deficit-oriented beliefs (e.g., “these kids can’t…”). Repeat the language back to the individual (“I heard you say…” and ask for clarity on the meaning (“Can you tell me more about that…?”))</td>
<td>• Engage teachers in frequent and strategic “archeological digs of their identity and self” (Ramkellawan-Arteaga and Bell, 2017). Ask purposeful questions that invite the interrogation and questioning of lived experiences, biases, and privilege.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Leverage interpersonal relationships to engage in conversations on how language usage might make colleagues feel.</td>
<td>• Create the space for students to provide them preliminary feedback; if not through co-generative dialogues (Emdin, 2016), then through mediums such as Google surveys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If empowered, offer to provide modeling of instructional activities that might lend themselves to more responsive practice. This can also include visiting/collaborating with other educators who are intentionally embedding CR-SE.</td>
<td>• Conduct audits of curricular practices by asking questions such as:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Set bite-sized incremental goals for the educator as it relates to Culturally Responsive practices. Create a checklist of what the goal should appear to embody once executed with fidelity</td>
<td>o What attempts are made to include Culturally Responsive practices?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ask probing questions to ascertain more about the individual’s lived experiences – what makes them tick?</td>
<td>o Are the cultural practices intentionally aligned with the deeper nuances of students’ lives?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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“We view students as co-conspirators and collaborators; we show and tell them teachers do not hold all the knowledge and power.”
from other Caribbean regions via the Gulf of Paria, Garlin’s (2019) commentary on limited economic opportunities (e.g., “was either music or badness”), or even the false narrative associated with defining wealth (2019, 0:45). The very line of “using the wrong part of speech” is a reflection of the tension all those who speak a non-conventional form of English must navigate (Garlin, 2019, 0:44). Who gets to determine where a verb should be placed? And whether or not it conveys the same idea? Doesn’t “wah going on” convey the same idea as “what’s up”?

When I began my career 15 years ago, I believed that I was a culturally responsive educator. I wrote an undergraduate dissertation about complimenting canonical texts with Indo-Caribbean young adult literature. The members of my committee lauded me for giving insight into literature that was not currently referenced in the traditional classroom context. The problem is that despite these surface level monikers, I had only begun to scratch the surface of what it meant to center students’ voice. As Garlin says, “I come from a different timing” (2019, 0:18). I had yet to probe and unpack my understanding of language and its impact on how I perceived the idea of doing school.

Since then, I’ve learned that I need to be clearer about the language of supremacy in schools. I needed to recognize that centering students requires adults negotiating their own identity and stepping back. Every time I step in front of a group of mostly white teachers at the behest of an administrator who wants me to focus on the quality of the written curriculum, I need to make a judgment call. Will this cohort of educators hear the importance of CR-SE, or will they immediately shut down because they assume I am questioning their character? In what ways can I tap into my own schooling experiences to build empathy and accessibility for CR-SE and most importantly for students’ voices?

In the first stanza of “The Struggle” Garlin (2019) focuses on finding space as a young emcee. Regardless of the circumstances, he says, “but the mic right and the light bright and you fight like a warrior” (Garlin, 2019, 0:47 - 0:48). Our children fight like warriors in spite of the attempts made to nullify learning experiences that connect to their respective lives. They see the brightness of their cultures and know its value. Through supremacist practices and ideology, we mitigate the importance of students’ cultural, linguistic and racial assets. The current state of the nation has forced a
reckoning across many school districts. It is no longer acceptable to engage in pedagogical and curricular microaggressions. Educators are being held accountable. Instead, the space must be made for additional voices at the table. Now, as Garlin says, “we have to celebrate, we have to celebrate” (2019, 3:07 - 3:09). We no longer have to ask for permission to celebrate our full selves in the classroom.

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Endnotes

1 Identity homicide is a term coined by the author (2020).

Reshma Ramkellawan, Ed.D. is a part time lecturer with Rutgers the State University of New Jersey, NJ as well as assistant adjunct faculty, The City College of New York. Her research centers on these themes and associated findings. Adhering to the ideas of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, she believes that the only way to improve schools is to be disruptive in practice. She can be reached at rramkell@gmail.com.
Self-Work before Toolkits: An Interview with Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz about Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education

This interview highlights how Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education can be utilized to consider new possibilities for and address inequities in urban schools. It discusses the importance of positive teacher identity as a prerequisite for effective CR-SE and Dr. Sealey-Ruiz’s framework of the Archeology of Self, which she describes as a framework that encourages educators to dig deep, peel back their layers, and explore how issues of race, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation live within them.

**Kisha:** Right now, there is a big focus on Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education as a framework to address inequities in schools. How do we empower teachers to develop skills and agency to engage in culturally responsive sustaining practices?

**Yolanda:** I think for those of us who have been on the front lines, we continue to do what we’ve been doing. That is to be really clear about no matter what we call it, this is about inequities that have been persistent, certainly for centuries that Black people have been in this country, but most notably since integration. We know, and we have always known, that school systems have not served Black and Brown children, particularly Black children, the way that they deserve to be served. We know that the schools have been structured with inequality in its roots and its blood. What I think is important with the movement, the nationwide movement is, number one, giving props to Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, even going back to James Banks and Cherry McGee Banks, Sonia Nieto, all of those folks and up to now with Bettina Love and Patricia Williams giving us the language to name it. To be very clear, that no matter what we call it, culturally responsive, culturally relevant, culturally sustaining, culturally responsive and sustaining, the bottom line is, it’s about attacking the inequities. We must continue what warriors have been doing, hold on to the language even as it shifts, and for me, it comes back to the Archeology of Self. I have to tell you that’s becoming more and more real to me that people are not doing the self-work. We have been conditioned, particularly in professional development, and working with pre-service and in-service teachers to go straight to the curriculum. What’s your curriculum like? Does it include this? Does it include that? Do you know that theory? And we need all of that, but if the repository for that, which is the body, the heart, the mind, the soul is not in sync with what the theory, and curriculum, and curricula offer, it’s not going to work.

**Kisha:** As a teacher educator, I remind my students of the importance of the Archeology of Self as the foundation of the work; however, I am met with resistance from students. They are focused on the best practices or a “toolkit” that they can memorize as the magic bullet to “fixing” students of color. My students only see themselves as teachers, in which they separate their personal identities from teaching. I have engaged my pre-service teachers in PhotoVoice assignments in which they unpack their identities utilizing photographs and reflective questions. They capture photographs and reflect throughout the course about their identity, while exploring the assets of their students and communities, and culturally responsive and sustaining practices. This assignment is an example of a CR-SE assessment, as pre-service teachers are given the opportunity to express their diverse identities and experiences as assets in understanding how to prepare to become teachers of diverse students. In the course design, I ensure that students understand that this is a cyclical and reflective practice process - we have to continue to unpack who we are, explore the assets of our students and enact culturally and responsive sustaining practices. Students are given an opportunity to submit assignments and assessments multiple times to demonstrate CR-SE, as the work of
self and understanding multiple expressions of diversity. At the end of the course, the students recognize the importance of self-work as an on-going lifelong journey.

Edmund: I think it’s very important to share stories and experiences of diverse groups of people. In my work with pre-service and in-service teachers, I use various forms of multimedia to share stories that highlight inequities. I love to use documentaries, videos, song lyrics, to highlight experiences of historically marginalized groups. This pedagogical practice moves beyond the traditional examples of assessments, assignments, and instructional materials, by incorporating multiple modes of learning. This is an example of CR-SE as the cultures, assets and inequities of students are centered in the curriculum. I model for preservice teachers the importance of utilizing these strategies, as a model to incorporate the assets of students within the curriculum. I agree with you Yolanda when you say CR-SE work is about attacking inequities. We have to prepare educators to recognize inequities, both systemic inequities, and inequities that they have put in place through practice and pedagogy, then provide support in how they can dismantle injustices. Once we can understand these experiences and empathize with them, we can focus on being part of the change to help to create better experiences for all people.

Edmund: What does the framework of the Archeology of Self look like and what is its relationship to freedom? Further, how can we use that as a framework for freedom in school and school systems?

Yolanda: Before I answer, I would like to ask Kisha about your experience in schools as it relates to learning about your history, how did it make you feel? Did you feel freer?

Kisha: It looks like an exploration of familial and cultural history. It also requires deep reflection about my own schooling experience (K-12, college, and grad school). Our past and current experiences impact how we show up in classrooms. For example, I was bussed to a primarily white high school. I remember asking my teacher are we going to learn about Black people? Her response was “you’re taking all AP classes isn’t that enough?” I was the only person pushing back. Then I went to a histori-
cally Black college, Spelman College. I grew up in the hood and never saw Black professionals. Then I was in a space with Black people whose families are Black doctors, lawyers, nurses, directors, etc. It was such a space of dissonance for me. I asked my roommate, “Is that your real Dad?” I had never met my dad. These were the questions I asked, but also having to look at myself and wonder, “was my life messed up?” I knew that growing up I was poor but when I got to college, I really knew I was poor. I was trying to figure out who I was and where I fit in this space. I remember asking myself every day, do I belong here? There’s no way they let me in here, not the person who grew up with her grandma, don’t know her dad, and don’t live with her mom. In the first course I took in college, we learned about the African Diaspora. And I just kept saying, hold on, wait, you mean to tell me, we were Kings and Queens? While learning these new things about Black excellence, I continuously thought about the stark differences between my family and my life in college. I wanted to share the new things that I learned. However, my family was focused on keeping food on the table.

Yolanda: The Archeology of Self is truly a journey for the self. It’s a framework (see Image 1). Certainly, the way that I’ve conceptualized it relates to K-12 education, but the Archeology of Self is something that is applied to all areas of life. So, for example when I talk about the Archeology of Self around love and intimacy, my artifact is my book, Love from the Vortex (Sealy-Ruiz, 2020). It is who I am as a mother and a teacher. So, it is a framework that is built on love, humility, reflection, and historical literacy. Archeology of Self is a framework of becoming what I see as ultimately, I’m hoping, of liberation, but the way it plays out in the pyramid of racial literacy development is knowing yourself within the educational context. My hope is that this framework is going to lead educators to then interrupt systems. So, you have to know yourself, you have to know history, and you have to be humble enough to recognize what you don’t know. You have to have a fundamental love for the communities that you’re serving. All of those elements or components as I’m calling them, are to help get you to this moment of self-extraction of what your beliefs are, your mindset, and values, as it relates to, in this case, education. Once you come to understand all of that, and you do that self-extraction, then you have to take appropriate action. So, for most people who decide to be abolitionist teachers (Love, 2019), warriors against inequity, they realize they are then led to interrupt racism, and that comes in different forms. We know that this thing of racism is in the air and in the water. My hope with the Archeology of Self framework is that it leads educators to be courageous, to interrupt systems and that that also offers a form of liberation.

![Image 1. Archeology of Self Framework](image-url)
**Kisha:** How do we do that self-excavation if we, in some cases as people of color, don’t really know our history, who we are, and where we come from?

**Yolanda:** Historical literacy is part of the framework. Khalil Gibran Muhammad who talks about having historical literacy mostly in his book, *The Condemnation of Blackness* (Muhammad, 2019), looks at how systems and mostly political and police systems have been condemning Black folks from the beginning. For example, you know the so-called 13th Amendment, but then coming up with all these Trump charges to get Black people in prison, which is pretty much in another enslaved state. So, if we don’t know the history of people of color we will continue to perpetuate these systems. The Archeology of Self has to be built on something. It has to be built on the humility of understanding that you don’t know, that you have partial truth, and that you probably are operating on lies. History is filled with lies. So you have to have the humility of understanding that what you know is partial but also filled with lies, filled with mistakes.

**Edmund:** I agree. I think Black history is underrepresented in all educational settings. So it doesn’t surprise me that many Black folks don’t have a deep understanding of the African American experience here in the United States, but also globally. I was an Africana Studies minor in college and was able to learn about the African diaspora and African American history here in the United States. I think this grounded me in wanting to do more for my community because the reality of our history in this country is that we have never been given a fair hand. When you think about the African American experience as it relates to the premise of what this nation was built on, nothing has been fair to people of color and everything we have, we had to fight and sacrifice for. Having a deep understanding of the experiences and histories of people of color in this nation can encourage educators to be more empathic and more attuned with the historic needs of the populations of youth that they serve. Further, it will highlight the reality that education systems have never been equitable for people of color, so there’s an importance and sense of urgency to engage in pedagogical strategies such as CR-SE to really get to the root of inequities and provide better learning opportunities for our students.

**Yolanda:** I don’t mean to be reductionist and simplify this, but the older I get the more I realize it is gonna have to come back always to the self. Teachers and teacher educators are not developing their own agency. How are you going to tell somebody you need to be an agent for change when you’re doing the same thing over and over? I’m thinking more and more that when we facilitate professional development, or when we engage in teacher education in our classroom, we need to be more focused on supporting teachers in developing self-plans; “self-development” plans. An example of a self-development plan, would be to explore one’s own cycle of socialization; especially around race (see Image 2 below). Teachers can begin their self-excavation by responding to the prompts. Self-development plans should be a staple assignment. For example, how are you tracking your development towards anti-racism? Physically writing stuff down, practicing it, bringing it back, discussing it with an accountability partner, and building your agency. As you uncover more about yourself, you see more. The hope is that your language changes, your questions change. I think that we have to be more deliberate in how we’re designing what we’re asking pre-service and in-service teachers to do as it relates to identity development. If teachers are actively participating and reflecting on ways they have and utilize their agency for the betterment of the community and students, it becomes easier for them to translate it into their own classroom. Many teachers lack proficiency as it relates to their own racial identity and we’re asking teachers and teacher educators to provide insight on how to harness and utilize insight to develop student agency when they’re not proficient in themselves. I think we have to be very deliberate with every exercise that we ask them to engage with.

**Edmund:** How can teacher educators and K-12 teachers empower students to develop agency to create change in their local and global communities?

We have to prepare educators to recognize inequities, both systemic inequities, and inequities that they have put in place through practice and pedagogy, then provide support in how they can dismantle injustices.
Using archeology of the self as a framework to go deep, and recognizing everything we ask educators to do comes back to the self. What racist statement have you said this week? How did it make you feel? How are you going to do it differently? Explicitly asking educators to name, and label and say very clearly, how they have been engaging in racism or anti-racism. I don’t know that our assignments do that.

Kisha: I agree. We have to model for students what we want them to do. If we want them to develop agency in their school and community, we have to demonstrate agency in our own contexts. What are we doing to empower ourselves? What are we doing to empower other teachers in the building? Our students watch us closely, to ensure that we are practicing what we preach.

Edmund: What does freedom look like? Within schools and school systems how can we achieve freedom for our most vulnerable populations?

Yolanda: You know something, I don’t think that’s so hard to answer because I think we’ve had models. I think we’ve had models with Haki Madhubuti and Carol Lee’s schools in Chicago. I think we have had models through Afrocentric education. I’m thinking back to the 90’s Benjamin Banneker, and Lester Young. I mean the freedom dreaming I think for me is how do we dream away this racism? How do we break free from the white gaze and center the Black gaze? Which I think could help us toward reimagining. Kisha, this is what you and Shamari are doing with the Black Gaze Podcast (Black Gaze Podcast, 2020). I almost want to say reacquainting with some of these models that already exist. So, I think the freedom is we are dreaming of a world where racism doesn’t exist in the way that it does and has and has limited so much of our potential. I will continue to fight that, so I think it’s a freedom fight. I think we look at those African-Centric schools. I think we look at some of the principles of Garveyism. I think we look at some of the principles of the Nation of Islam. I think we look at some of the principles of these very Black centered organizations and schools and have the freedom to get the resources. I’m not saying for white men to please hand me the check, but get out of the way. So that I can actually have the freedom to get the resources in the same way that you do. So, when we talk about

Image 2. Cycle of Socialization Adapted by Bobbie Harro
freedom dreaming, we're freedom dreaming these philanthropic organizations that have for centuries been so tightly held by Rockefeller and Carnegies and other kinds of white monies. Aspen Foundation, all of that. See that's what makes it so difficult, because we're fighting against history. Where are we on the timeline? We're going against this history, that it's like, you know taking a shank and trying to break down a wall that's existed for 400 years. Like the Great Wall of China. That's really what we're doing. Racism is like this great wall that we're trying to scale but also break down. So, the question is, how do we, you know, remove some of the bricks that the wall becomes weaker? Hopefully, the generation behind us will tear down the wall altogether. That's my hope and dream. I think we reacquaint as we reimagine. Because we have models. We have examples.

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Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education is “grounded in cultural view of learning and human development in which multiple expressions of diversity (e.g., race, social class, gender, language, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, ability) are recognized and regarded as assets for teaching and learning” (Editor's Introduction, this issue). The objectives of CR-SE align with Dr. Yolanda Sealy-Ruiz’s framework of Archeology of Self, which promotes the understanding and inclusion of diverse groups. Dr. Sealy-Ruiz’s framework of Archeology of Self focuses on identity development as a precursor to engaging in effective CR-SE practices. While we agree that CR-SE is the goal to engage all students, by highlighting and challenging inequities through curricula, we believe that teachers must interrogate their identities and their life experiences as a pre-requisite to engaging in CR-SE strategies and pedagogies. More importantly, in order for teachers to gain the skills necessary to be effective in engaging in CR-SE, teacher education programs and school professional development sessions must encourage teachers to develop historical literacies, as well as explore their personal and professional identities, and as it relates to the lives and experiences of their students.

For more information about Dr. Sealey-Ruiz’s Archeology of Self Framework: https://vimeo.com/299137829

References


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Kisha Porcher, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of English Education at the University of Delaware and the co-host of the Black Gaze Podcast. Her research focuses on three distinct interrelated areas: 1) unpacking of self and identity as foundational to teaching and learning 2) exploration of assets and conditions of Black & Brown students and communities 3) centering Blackness in community-engaged learning and teaching. She can be reached University of Delaware, 203 Memorial Hall, Newark, DE 19716, and by email: kporcher@udel.edu.
Increasingly, computing and technology permeate almost every aspect of our lives. The demand for a technologically skilled workforce is growing rapidly (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), and thinking computationally is increasingly considered a necessary skill for success in today’s society (Wing, 2016; Grover and Pea, 2018). Despite this, many people have historically been underrepresented in the field of computer science, including women; Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people; people from low-income backgrounds; individuals with disabilities, and English language learners (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2019). Further, the well known ‘digital divide’ that disproportionately affects these same groups has been exacerbated by COVID-19 (Vogels et al., 2020).

Computer Science (CS) for All initiatives around the country are attempting to address these disparities by fostering equitable access and participation in CS education (Margolis & Goode, 2016). Central to this goal are ensuring that all students receive meaningful, high-quality CS instruction at school, and developing reliable and holistic assessments to measure student achievement in CS—which to date have generally been available only for advanced high school CS courses (DeLyser et al., 2016.). Ron Summers and Christy Crawford are leaders in New York City’s CS4All initiative, which seeks to bring CS to the City’s 1.1 million public school students. In this conversation, they provide an overview of CS education in NYC and highlight the importance and promise of culturally responsive practices for enriching students’ classroom experiences and outcomes.

Interviewers: To begin, please tell us about your backgrounds, your experiences as computer science (CS) teachers, and your current role?

Ron Summers: I was born and raised here in New York City—in Brooklyn and Queens—and attended public schools. Although my schools were not able to offer me and my classmates any tech-rich experiences, they did offer me comfort in my community and pride in being African American. I love being Black because it was part of my early schooling.

I also have first-hand experience in the tech industry from working at IBM. I saw, in the early 2000s, how much monetary value tech expertise had and this prompted me to ask, “Why am I making corporate America rich and not my own community?” That questioning led me to become a teacher in NYC—and doing it and loving it, for ten years.

I have a background teaching high school CS, in software and user interface development, but also the entrepreneurial piece, which I think is the most important. I believe that entrepreneurial thinking is the key to solving problems, [especially] while applying the “fail fast” approach that startups use to build some great product ideas into thriving enterprises. I do not want students to just build cool stuff; I want them to build cool stuff that can become businesses to fuel economic mobility and change their lives.

An important reason why I wanted to teach CS was connected to my own experiences—I thought it was important for tech readiness and creativity to be present in schools of color and not just [as an] afterthought to state testing. Success was and still is defined...
for me as student empowerment. My students flourished and did some pretty amazing things: Some started viable businesses via my incubator program, others won entrepreneurship competitions organized by the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), and others developed phone applications for dyslexia. I was able to provide exposure, access, and belonging in computational thinking, an entrepreneurial mindset, and a design process to students on a classroom scale—and this empowered my students to walk into rooms they never had access to, while knowing they belonged there! My job now is to do that on a scale for 1.1 million students. That is what I call full circle.

**Christy Crawford:** Similar to Ron, I transitioned into my career as an educator from another field. I was a producer for NBC News. But I left television after the death of my father, a life-long educator and former NYC teacher. I realized a more positive change could be made in the world through teaching. I taught 2nd and 3rd grade, here in NYC—in Harlem and the Bronx—for more than a decade. Interestingly, it was strongly suggested to me [by my principal] that I begin teaching a “technology course.” And so, I did it: I tackled my fear, watched YouTube video after YouTube video to learn more and found I could be of service to lots of kids who were ready to create with tech, not just be consumers of tech. Like many scholars of culturally responsive pedagogy suggest (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2010), I learned about my students’ interests. I found out, for instance, that my students had a drum class they loved before mine. They were constantly tapping on their desks in my classroom. So, we used that positive energy! We started tapping out our [programming] code to make sure we didn’t miss a single character in our long lines of code. It worked so well that 3rd graders who would not be able to navigate such advanced or tedious coding were able to jump into programming websites!

In my experience as a teacher, I found that often children who did not excel in traditional subjects excelled in my tech class. Children who did not necessarily wait for directions, those who were fearless, ready to press any button or try anything, were the perfect students for CS. Serving those children became my passion.

As a part of the CS4All initiative, my role is to make sure that teachers are armed with pedagogical strategies that recognize that differences [between people] should be treated as an asset for teaching and learning (Freire, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2014) and, and that there are real practical plans of action for equitable classrooms in CS.

I: Before we talk about CR-SE, could you give us an overview of what CS education looks like at schools across NYC?

**RS:** We first have to confront the idea that CS has a history that is not so clean, right? There is racism and sexism there. There are just so many “-isms” that are involved in this idea that “CS is mine” and one size fits [all]. But we know that’s not true, and I think if you take a deep look at the CS4All initiative’s portfolio, what you’ll see is that our approach is around the idea that one size does not fit all. We focus on the [CS instruction] options that we can provide a school or community school district so they can figure out what is right for the students and community that they serve.

This means that we have different course offerings by grade-level. Our integrated unit curriculum gives elementary and middle school teachers the tools to incorporate CS instruction into their English, science, social studies, or math lessons. At the high school level, students take “standalone” CS courses, which can be a semester to a yearlong, and range from introductory to Advanced Placement CS classes. I know we’ll be talking more about CR-SE in CS shortly but I’d like to note that all of [CS4All’s] curricula and materials are designed with attention to guidelines from New York state on CR-SE practices (New York State Education Department, 2018) as well as the equity and inclusion standards that the Computer Science Teachers Association has laid out for CS teachers (Computer Science Teachers Association, 2020).

So, if you imagine it, a school leader and teacher can walk into our [CS] “grocery store,” think about what they need to actually serve their community, and that’s what they take [back to their schools]. And it doesn’t mean they get the recipe right the first time. There

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Drop the checklist and realize you can’t do everything all the time.

I: Could you say a bit about what led the CS4All team in NYC to place an emphasis on CR-SE in the CS curriculum?

CC: To disrupt inequity in the U.S., it is necessary to talk about race, power, and history. However, if you are studying CS in college, it may be unusual for [faculty] to talk about racial literacy in CS even though they go hand in hand. As far as I know, one exception to this is a series of workshops that were offered at Stanford University by Dr. Howard Stevenson and Mutule Nkonde. What we’re saying is, “You know what? This conversation needs to start at the K-12 level. By the time [students] get to college, it may be too late.” So, we’re following Daniels et al. (2019) in articulating what racial literacy means for CS. First, we want teachers (and, subsequently, their students) to have an intellectual understanding of how structural racism operates—whether it is through algorithms or social media platforms—and how it might show up in technology that doesn’t even exist yet. And then, we’re hoping to build emotional intelligence about how we deal with race and racially stressful situations. I mean, this is what all teachers were hoping to get in college [courses]. If we did not do this now . . . it would be unethical.

To put this in more concrete terms: I see protesting on the street, but there is also a lot of digital activism here. I feel like what our [curriculum] gives kids is a new medium to express themselves. Let me give you an example. A few years ago, my 4th grade students were angry about the portrayal of Haiti in the news. They noted that mainstream news reports on Haiti failed to mention the strength, wisdom, and value of this nation. Students decided they would build websites to change some of the public perception of Haiti—so they could “take back” the narrative. My students then invited caregivers and community members into the school, not only for a community convening on Haiti, but also to teach their elders and friends to create their own websites so they would not be at the mercy of mainstream media that may devalue their culture. This shows that kids don’t just have to be consumers of technology. To borrow from Ladson-Billings (2014), students were building their sociopolitical consciousness by using their classroom knowledge to identify and help solve real-world problems.

To answer the original question, it would be unbelievably inappropriate if kids in NYC didn’t have CS with CR-SE. Without it, we’re not equipping kids for this new civil rights movement. It’s like going to school without a pencil.

I: So, what does CR-SE look like in a CS lesson or in a CS classroom? How, if at all, is this different from the way we think about CR-SE in other disciplines?

CC: Before diving into what CR-SE looks like, I want to add one more thought about the importance of CR-SE in CS classes. As in STEM classes, there are often Brown and Black children or women with impostor syndrome in CS classes (Rosenstein et al., 2020). They are wondering, “Do I really belong here? No one here looks like me.” Not only are they dealing with impostor syndrome, but also they’re dealing with stereotype threat (Steele, 1997; Kumar, 2012). You have kids who are so nervous they may be the only one: the only girl, the only
Puerto Rican, the only African American. The only whatever in a certain classroom. They worry, “What if I make a mistake? Will I live up to the worst stereotypes that my teacher or classmates may have about people like me?” That is unbelievably difficult, no matter how old you are. So, we’re saying with CR-SE in CS: It is incredibly important to beat back impostor syndrome and stereotype threat.

To your question about what CR-SE looks like in a CS classroom, two things stand out to me. First, relationships. Teachers implementing CR-SE spend a great deal of time building trust and positive relationships. They realize that before they get to the rigor of CS, these actions are necessary (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This may include a teacher taking the time to survey her students or holding focus groups in order to understand their strengths, comfort levels, likes, and dislikes—around and beyond CS. Then, this teacher should use that information to build her lessons. This will help cultivate trust with her students—and cultivating trust is paramount. When there’s a matter of trust, kids don’t mind failing. They think, “I can iterate again and again and again.” But think about it: If you don’t have trust, you don’t want to fail in front of somebody!

The second principle I’d point to is the sharing of authority. If we were to go into a classroom, you may not necessarily know who’s the boss, right? Who’s the teacher? Who’s the facilitator? We’re saying this is a group effort where the child has a real voice and a real value—as Gay (2013) says, it’s a way of developing students’ agency, efficacy, and empowering them. This means that students are frequently leading their class, showing others how to get “unstuck” while programming or sharing a new line of code to trick out a website about something they love. It may mean a group of students form a “Help Desk” to assist others, rather than waiting for the teacher to come to the rescue when there is a problem.

Finally, to address your question about whether or not CR-SE in CS is different than in other disciplines: It shouldn’t be. It’s not much different than in other subject areas . . . it should be the same in any subject where it’s being used. It’s simply that in STEM fields, where the numbers of Black, Brown, and female students are few, a CR-SE mindset is essential to increase the diversity of students in these subjects.

I: As Ron mentioned earlier, students receive CS instruction in different ways across the K-12 spectrum in NYC. To what extent are the principles of CR-SE that you are helping teachers develop specific to certain grades?

RS: This is an interesting question. CR-SE does not look different in each grade band, it’s how grade bands approach student learning that looks different, and that’s how you embed your CR-SE. So, an elementary school teacher is definitely thinking about student learning in a very different way than a high school teacher is. And, as I just mentioned, what we’re trying to do is give her the foundation, like the questions she should ask herself before she applies her own knowledge, pedagogy, and expertise to each specific situation. For instance, Gay (2013) suggests that a question that teachers should reflect on is whether or not there are specific beliefs about different groups of students that are embedded in pedagogical practices a teacher might want to implement. So, a teacher might ask herself, “Why am I putting this student in this group? Do I fully understand their strengths in programming, or am I making assumptions about their abilities based on the fact that they have an IEP?”
CC: To add to what Ron said, a group of teachers and I created a “study guide” for teachers based on Hammond’s (2015) book. This guide gives teachers specific questions they should reflect on—and I’m using Hammond’s (2015) language here—to build their culturally responsive mindsets, to cultivate learning partnerships, to support students’ intellectual growth, and to create an environment that is safe for learning. We see all of these tenets as important parts of culturally responsive teaching. For instance, a question that teachers should ask themselves when self-assessing their classroom environments is: “Do my classroom routines and protocols support deeper learning for all students?” So, although the classroom practices will be different for 2nd grade teachers relative to 12th grade teachers, all teachers can use this question as a starting point to take stock of their classroom environments—and to make improvements.

I: Could you give me a few examples of what culturally responsive lessons might look like in CS classrooms across the K-12 spectrum?

CC: Absolutely. Part of CR-SE is a commitment to talking about social justice and the management of stressors for children. We’ve had kindergarten teachers who have done lessons about animation focusing on self-love and expression. Here, a teacher showed a clip from the film, “Hair Love” of a dad doing a little girl’s hair and then had each child design their own [face and] hair in [the programming language] Scratch. She had children talk about and become the owners of terms that define their skin color. Discussions about skin color in the early grades may be difficult. Kids may not actually color themselves the color that they are; they may color what’s “popular” in a community, but their teacher understands and teaches them to and through their personal and cultural strengths (Gay, 2013). So, here we had a teacher who was pushing her students: “Yep, you’re right. This is beautiful skin. What are we going to call it? Is it peanut butter? Mocha brown?” There was a real sense of ownership, and in kindergarten, 1st grade, 2nd grade . . . self-love through the smog of “isms” is a revolutionary act. The difference might be in a 10th or 11th grade class where students are looking at the police data in their neighborhood. They’re looking at the number of arrests at a certain time, like when they’re going to school in the morning, and then using data science to compile the data and then build models to show community leaders in their area. The action may look different, but the philosophy is the same.

RS: And, Christy, you also touched on this idea of how an understanding of CR-SE really creates a CS classroom that’s more alive than ever for the students. Because we’re tackling the actual problems that exist in our world, as scholars of culturally relevant education suggest (Ladson-Billings, 2014), and we’re not solving some silly slope problem dealing with a guy trying to jump over a hill in Lake Tahoe, right? Students get to say, “There’s this issue where I can’t walk down the street. I wonder how prevalent that is? Let me look at the data. Let me compare the data to those who are in Park Slope [an affluent neighborhood in Brooklyn]. Wow, there may be a problem here. I wonder how I can use CS to actually create some type of solution? I’m now going to go to AP CS class, or I’m now going to go to college and study CS. I’m going to come up with the new algorithm that is going to be fair and just so that some of this profiling won’t happen.”

CC: If you took a look at our newest course for middle school students—it’s called Critical Computing—kids also study a social category or identity. It could be national origin, gender, socioeconomic status, ability, race, family structure . . . and they discuss how they can advocate with and for this group. That’s what school is about, right? Supporting students who are looking critically at their environment and seeing where they can be of help is an important way in which we implement a culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014). This is really digital youth activism at its best. Here, CR-SE in CS means we’re getting rid of the typical class presentation tri-folds. We’re getting rid of the dioramas. And we’re . . . allowing kids who have big ideas about identity, policies, and justice to bring the issues they care about to the world stage.

RS: Yeah, and do you mind if I add one more thing? We’re still learning how to do this thing. Yes, we’ve had a lot of success with the curriculum that our team has created and the work that Christy has pushed. But we’re still learning how to operationalize it in a way that is scalable for all 1.1 million students in NYC. Every community school district is different, and every district has a different definition of what equity means and what CR-SE means. An initial part of our work with districts, in line with what Gay (2013) suggests, will be to support them
in identifying what their priorities are. In other words, we are here to help district staff develop and articulate their commitments—whether to racial/ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, or other forms of equity. And then, I think that the next part of our work will be testing, iterating, and seeing what strategy sticks, but also trying to normalize a conversation around equity in CS that all of our districts can understand. And then we can create solutions.

I: I'd like to follow up the point you just made, Ron. Scalability is an important consideration for the CS4All initiative in NYC. What are some ways in which you and your team ensure that the depth and breadth of CS knowledge and CR-SE practices are growing?

RS: We understand that before you can ramp or scale up a strategy, it needs to work first. Do you start with breadth before depth, or the opposite? These questions are more challenging when we think about the intersection of race, gender, and bias within CR-SE practices and personal experience. Christy has been really smart about considering how simultaneous attention to breadth and depth are needed, because our teachers are at different points in their equitable practices journey. Scalability for us is currently focused on testing what builds efficacy at the teacher and school level and then pulling out those learnings to develop guidance and expectations that a district system can use to move the work of equitable CS and CS-RE practice.

CC: I’d like to build on what Ron said by giving you an example. We recently designed and implemented the first rounds of our “Exploring Equity in Computer Science” course for teachers, which included 83 co-conspirators [i.e., CS teachers across NYC]. These teachers have various levels of understanding of CR-SE and very different levels of proficiency in racial literacy. But, they are all engaging in at least 40 hours of synchronous and asynchronous work to further their understanding of racial literacy (Stevenson, 2014; Hammond, 2015), universal design for learning (Israel et al., 2018), and translanguage (Vogel et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2020) although we hope that teachers will continue to study with us for years to come. As a part of this training, teachers spend considerable time doing introspective work as well as examining their own racial socialization and comfort level when discussing race before diving into lessons. This is a process that teachers with all levels of expertise can benefit from.

Our co-conspirators will not only turnkey learnings to others in their school building, but the lessons they bring back to us or the CR-SE resources they create will help us train new CS teachers throughout the city. They will help us build a strong ecosystem in CS.

I: At the individual classroom level, what are some challenges that teachers face in making their CS instruction more culturally responsive? What kind of advice do you give teachers in such situations?

RS: I just have a quick line that I use: It’s okay to not get it right the first time. I think when folks hear CR-SE, it becomes loaded, right? And people ask, “Am I going to make the wrong racial statement?” Or, you know, “Am I going to approach a child in the wrong way?”

You’ve got to let your guard down—just like your kids, hopefully, are letting their guard down! And it’s not going to be perfect on that first iteration. [CR-SE is] something that you’re going to get better at. And I’m not the only person making this argument! In fact, Gay (2013) argues that teachers have to resist their and others’ resistance to CR-SE and that a culturally responsive teaching practice is a developmental process—it is learned over time. In a similar vein, Ladson-Billings (2014) asserts that if teachers get to a place of “complete certainty and assuredness” about their practice, they will stop growing—and their students will wither (p. 77). It’s important for us to keep growing.

CC: Oftentimes, teachers are very overwhelmed. They’re looking for a checklist to make it easier. There is no checklist for CR-SE. There are, however, a series of what Freire (2000) called humanizing pedagogies that we particularly love that work well with a CR-SE approach such as universal design for learning (Israel et al., 2018) and translanguage (Vogel et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2020) These asset-based pedagogies offer practical assistance for teachers. Drop the checklist and realize you can’t do everything all the time. There are so many things included in CR-SE because it’s just good teaching. You have to focus on a couple of things that you can humanly maintain with CS in CR-SE.
I: What, if anything, do we know about the short- and long-term impacts of CR-SE in CS classrooms? What have you learned anecdotally from your experiences and from supporting teachers in NYC?

CC: I will say that teachers continually come back to us with reflections about kids that they didn't know much about, information about kids that wouldn't open their mouth in CS class because of shyness, disinterest, or lack of understanding. [Teachers have] learned ways to engage and push children who did not typically take an active role in CS. They tell us that a few children who were not apt to share in class now feel as if they are in a place that is emotionally and intellectually safe enough to act as class standouts or leaders.

RS: Much of our CR-SE work has only been really implemented over the last couple of years, so we're still waiting to be able to crunch some of that data to be able to see, you know, at a system-level, how has our curriculum done?

I: As Christy mentioned earlier, CR-SE in CS is important to the CS4All initiative in NYC because it can be a way to empower students and give them a voice. How have you already seen this in action? And how do you hope students use their knowledge to make their classrooms, schools, or communities more just?

CC: Of course, those final projects that we see students complete are great examples. But [student voice] even comes out in something like a hackathon where kids get a community problem, and then they race to come to a solution using CS. This is a way, as Gay (2013) suggests, of connecting in-school learning to out-of-school living! Then, of course, [students’ solutions are] introduced to some celebrity or politician. When they get to see that adults sit up and listen, it really has kids thinking. It’s sort of the civics lesson that all children should have the chance to experience.

RS: Yeah, you hit it right on the head, Christy. If we did our job right, they’re ready to disrupt institutionalized systems of oppression with covert histories of racist practices! It’s a lesson that we didn’t necessarily always have [in school], but our students today are able to take skills that they learn in CS and they’re not afraid to break some stuff and say, “That’s not right. And I think I have a better solution.” Those are the examples that we see when we go visit schools having their end-of-year CS fairs.

To answer the second part of your question, if our culture of CR-SE was effective, what I hope to see are clubs that are open and have different hues that are represented, see student councils that are using CS to solve problems that are happening in their school buildings and outside the walls of their schools. I would hope to be able to see classes—or sequences of classes—that aren’t just about access to AP [CS], but where the CS experiences and skills together are setting kids up to flourish when they leave high school. In a way, this sounds like a utopia. But this is the utopia that we want, right?

CC: I agree with everything Ron said and I will just add this. There is a push in the CS community to say, “You need CS” or “You’ll be successful if you take CS.” Sometimes, comments are made as if Black and Brown children are lacking in something—and CS must come to the rescue. But many of our students are raised to be resilient. They have the wisdom of several generations who have dealt with inequality head-on. Buolamwini (2017) talks about failed artificial intelligence technology, such as self-driving cars that may hit Brown and Black people because they don’t recognize pedestrians of color. We go to hotels to talk about CS, and we can’t wash our hands in the hotel bathroom because the sink sensors do not detect the color of our dark skin. This happens because, as Buolamwini’s (2017) research shows, companies that are building these products are using datasets that are either overwhelmingly lighter-skinned or datasets that ignore underrepresented groups. CS needs [Black and Brown] kids to be in decision making positions to create inclusive products and systems. These kids, it’s not that they need CS: CS needs them. We need these wise children to be part of the equation that serves all of society.
Interviewers’ Parting Thoughts

As our conversation with Ron and Christy highlights, implementing the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy into CS instruction has the potential to enrich students’ school experiences by fostering stronger relationships between students and their teachers, increasing students’ interest and engagement in the content, and making learning more relevant and personalized. Some of the academic work that Ron and Christy draw on has been distilled into audio and video resources that are available on the NYC CS4All website: cs4all.nyc/equity. CS teachers can find sample lesson plans, for students of all grade-levels, by navigating to the “Resource Center” section of this site. The “Remote Equitable Practices Teaching Guide” (also available in the Resource Center) has insights, encouragement, and resources that will likely be helpful for all teachers who are navigating virtual instruction during (and beyond) the COVID-19 pandemic. For an additional set of CR-SE resources that are not directly linked to CS, teachers can sign up for emails from Zaretta Hammond, whose book Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain has shaped some of Ron and Christy’s work.

In addition to creating a fulfilling academic experience, Ron and Christy highlight the potential of CR-SE in CS to provide students with the tools, voice, and agency to succeed outside the academic sphere—whether in their personal lives, professional endeavors, or as citizens in our democracy. As schools and districts across the country expand their CS offerings, we have the opportunity to infuse culturally responsive practices in all aspects of this work—from professional development for teachers to classroom activities and assessments for students. In fact, as part of our evaluation of the CS4All initiative in NYC, we are investigating the ways in which CR-SE is enacted in CS instruction and its influence on students, including social-emotional outcomes such as students’ confidence, sense of belonging, rejection of stereotypes about who CS is for, and engagement in CS. We hope this conversation is a starting point for a broader dialogue about how the field of CS can be more inclusive of and responsive to all individuals, and the promise this holds to help make our schools and communities more equitable.

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The Journey of a Culturally Responsive Teacher Educator

Kevin Cataldo

This interview explores what it means to be a culturally responsive teacher educator in today's world and why it is crucial to advocate for a culturally responsive and sustaining education for all students. It shares how an exceptional individual became a culturally responsive elementary teacher, and how she has become a culturally responsive teacher educator and educational consultant.

Kevin Cataldo: To start, can you state your name and current occupation?

Interviewee (MBG): My name is Michelle Brown-Grant. My life's work has centered around P-16 education for 32 years, particularly in urban settings. The last 12 years have focused on being a practitioner-scholar as an Assistant Professor of Teacher Education. I am currently an educational consultant and a curriculum and teaching doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University.

KC: As you know, this issue is about culturally responsive teaching, and you're known for teaching courses in education methods, early childhood, communication in educational settings, literacy, school policy, and supervision. You've also led professional development workshops on culturally responsive teaching for pre-service and in-service teachers and school leaders in urban school districts. Can you start by describing how you became a culturally responsive teacher?

MBG: My journey to becoming a culturally responsive educator began my first year of teaching in the fall of 1988. Thinking I was ready to transform my old neighborhood as a human development major from Cornell University, I encountered a group of students who challenged me from my first day alone with them. More than half of them were repeating third grade; some of them for the second time. The look of defeat and the anger some of them expressed in my early days with them was enough to make anyone give up. I followed my colleagues' advice in 'don't smile 'till Christmas. Keep them separated in rows.' I valued their advice at the time since some of them were my family's former teachers. Few of their strategies positively impacted my classroom climate. Some days I left work crying out of frustration and feeling helpless about how to help some of them see their value. Then one day, my brother came to visit. Within five minutes, he identified every student with challenging behavior by observing where they were positioned in the classroom. For instance, he could tell which students felt hopeless, did not see their value as a learner, and were genuinely angry with life. His unfiltered analysis unleashed memories of watching my classmates with gum pushed on their foreheads and having to sit in their waste because of a no bathroom policy. I'd succumbed to problematic practices permeating urban schools which rendered some of my students into the category of deviant. That is students who would not go on to succeed in life and fall into the hands of our criminal justice system. Imposter syndrome surfaced. In other words, at the time, I felt that my undergraduate career did not truly prepare me to make a difference in my community as I had hoped. My undergraduate university did not include educational theory or methods in its catalog of thousands of courses. Though my professors there allowed me to create independent courses and field experiences to learn about schools, fundamental knowledge about the science of teaching escaped me. Rather than abandon my students, as more than 50% of teachers do in their first few months of teaching in urban areas, I decided to pursue knowledge about teaching and learning. This led to my enrollment in a teacher education program at Teachers College, Columbia University in the spring of 1989. My reading methods and reading diagnosis courses very quickly offered insight into where some of the gaps in my students' learning existed.

Next, I realized that many of my students needed more affirming experiences in school. Though I'd experienced success sitting in the same desks etched with remnants of some of my classmates' carvings, those students did not envision themselves as achievers. A transformation emerged in my classroom when I began...
to link students’ interests and cultures into my lessons. One of my students had difficulty with math concepts; however, she could remember every outfit and matching shoe I wore for weeks at a time. Once I let her share her recollections mathematically, that student showed others how to construct combinations of patterns and arrays. We celebrated her success on a math assessment on the topic. The memory of watching her lift her head from the desk with a gleam in her eye, then saying, “Really, I did it?” still moves me. Incorporating their lived experiences and celebrating their achievements, made a difference.

By my third year of teaching, I created my mental tool belt with instructional practices and resources that would allow me to meet all my students’ learning needs and provide them with learning experiences that would enable them to enhance their cultural awareness. This meant numerous trips to cultural institutions around NYC as well as our community. Whereas others saw abandoned buildings and empty lots, my students learned to view elements of their community that were assets. They discovered how there were many places of worship within a three-mile radius from their school. Imagine a group of eight and nine-year-olds with clipboards taking notes and drawing images in the neighborhood back in the ’80s. Walking trips to McDonalds and White Castles exposed them to adding, calculating tax, subtracting across zeros, and counting change. An excursion to the Apollo Theater in Harlem to witness a live radio show showed them the importance of communication. My students walked through the school building singing songs which affirmed them as students. I can still recall a poem by [Teachers College] alum Lindamichelle Baron (1981) we chanted daily: “This is the way, hey. We start the day, hey, to get the knowledge, hey, to get to college, hey. We won’t stop there, hey. Go anywhere, hey. We work and smile, hey. cause that’s our style, hey. This is the way we start the day, cause we don’t play, hey. Now, what do you say? HEY!” (Baron, 1981). I added the last line to the poem. Wow! I can still remember it. We climbed school stairs counting by threes, fours, or whatever multiples we needed to remember for our multiplication and division facts that week. Oh, the raps my classes and I used to make up as mnemonic devices to remember facts. My third year of teaching was my most memorable. From the trips, collaborations with special education classes, and freedom to teach as long as I “covered the curriculum,” my black and brown students’ performance on district, city, and state assessments exceeded expectations.

Later in my educational program at [Teachers College], the scholarship of Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, Dr. Sonia Nieto, and Dr. Geneva Gay fueled my interactions with students. Their work enhanced my tool belt by offering me research and a language to confirm how my instructional practices strengthened my students’ achievement. In essence, I evolved into becoming culturally responsive.

Some of those same practices I used in teaching in the Bronx evolved as I began to teach in the suburbs. Later as a supervisor, director of instruction, principal, consultant, and teacher educator, I began to share principles guided by research and my experiences which led to successful classroom climates where students could thrive. Those ideas included:

• Investing in learning about one’s students through informal assessments and conversations. This will facilitate creating and strengthening a community of learners.
• Viewing students’ diverse backgrounds as assets. Consider strengthening every part of their development- social-emotional, cognitive, physical as one creates learning experiences.
• Having high expectations for student learning and scaffold students as they acquire their knowledge skills, and dispositions. Model and take risks in front of them to demonstrate phases of the learning process and resiliency strategies.
• Knowing one’s content and developing a plethora of strategies to engage students in learning it. Staying abreast of current trends that positively impact teaching and learning.
• Involving students in their learning which also includes centering students’ voice as they learn to construct knowledge and develop their ideas.
• Offering authentic, collaborative, relevant learning experiences connected to students’ lives.
• Using families as resources by tapping into their funds of knowledge.
• Teaching students how to end oppression and discrimination and inequitable actions of any kind. Teach to transgress, not be bystanders.
• Focus on equity and not equality. Students are unique. They have diverse lived experiences, interests, needs, and influences on their lives.
• Being flexible and fluid. Don’t let the standards and assessments paralyze or stagnate teaching. Consider what the people in front of you need at the time. Some may have gaps in knowledge due to a lack of exposure or opportunity.

KC: Do you consider yourself to be a culturally responsive teacher educator today?

MBG: Of course. As a teacher and leadership educator, I acknowledge that to facilitate meaningful learning experiences that lead to increased knowledge and culturally responsive practices, I must accept, value, and embrace the various cultures, lived experiences, and funds of knowledge people bring with them to my classrooms and workshops. In doing so, I establish positive relationships with them and see their cultural identities have a voice in our meeting spaces, especially in the curriculum. My classrooms and workshops engage people in reflecting on their own experiences. This facilitates their ability to later make sense of their actions as they interact with others.

KC: Can you share scholarly books published by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings and Dr. Sonia Nieto that have challenged your thinking and influenced your work as a culturally responsive teacher in the Bronx and as a teacher educator?

MBG: The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children (1994), and Crossing over to Canaan (2001), are two major books published by Dr. Ladson-Billings that influenced and inspired me to practice culturally responsive teaching. In reading and studying her work, I came across three tenets of culturally responsive teaching that guide my work in teacher education—academic achievement/student learning, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness. Every time Dr. Ladson-Billings is in the area, I am compelled to hear her speak in person. I find myself signifying to affirm her assertions. She does not hesitate to speak the truth.

Dr. Sonia Nieto’s The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities (1999) helped me understand the role of culture and lived experiences in student learning. When she shared her journey in education through Brooklyn Dreams: My Life in Public Education (2015), Nieto made me reflect on my own experiences. Maybe when I’ve reached another milestone in education, I will share my own story.

KC: I’m wondering about the significance of each of the tenets of culturally relevant education, can you tell me a bit more?

MBG: Sure. Dr. Ladson-Billings’ research has suggested that to ensure that students receive a high-quality education, students must experience academic achievement. Teachers are responsible for facilitating student learning by challenging students’ minds through meaningful learning experiences. When providing students with the chance to enhance their knowledge, it is also essential for teachers to help students develop their cultural competence. Teachers must help their students expand their knowledge and understanding of their own culture while acquiring skills from another culture. Hence, giving students the chance to become culturally competent learners in society.

Finally, students must get the chance to develop their socio-political consciousness. That is, students must get the opportunity to challenge and critically analyze the social inequalities and inequities that are produced and reproduced in their communities and the wider society. In doing so, students learn more about the current conditions of the society in which they live. Back when I used to teach third grade and took my students on those community walks, they also discovered issues in their neighborhoods. After our trips, my students learned to write letters to community leaders about elements of their community that were problematic. One year, this learning experience led to a trip to our town to meet the mayor and visit the city council chambers. Part of being a culturally responsive educator is recognizing that students learn best when learning is natural and connected to their interests and life experiences.

KC: You’ve been an active member in the field of education for three decades, and earlier you shared with me scholarly literature that has influenced your day-to-day practice. I’m wondering if there are any other role models
that continue to guide and motivate you to be a culturally responsive teacher educator today?

**MBG:** When I think of others whose practices laid the blueprint for me to create my day-to-day practices as a culturally responsive teacher educator, many of them were more activists than scholars. Women like Mary McLeod Bethune, Dorothy Height, Shirley Chisolm, Marva Collins, Dr. Adelaide Sanford, Dr. Leslie Williams, Dr. Vanessa Siddle Walker, Dr. Cynthia Dillard. Oh, I can't forget about Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz and her scholarly work in addressing issues of diversity, equity, and social justice in education. Her spirit, every time Yolanda enters a room, I am drawn to her spirit. Though I’ve never taken a class with her at [Teachers College], Dr. Sealey-Ruiz always makes time to engage in any conversation I initiate. We never part without a hug. I’m a hugger. Human connection is a vital part to my energy and existence. My students who get to know me outside of the classroom context come to see that. It’s a shame that because of the actions of some, educators are not allowed to hug children for fear of accusations.

**KC:** It is great to hear that you consider yourself to be a culturally responsive teacher educator. Can you tell me about your experience with a teacher education curriculum? Precisely how you approach the curriculum through the lens of culturally responsive teaching.

**MBG:** Though teacher education programs have many masters to serve as accredited entities, my course artifacts are designed to help my students make practical connections to the content to meet the needs of the students I teach each semester. All of the professional organizations’ standards connect to the course goals and student learning outcomes; however, I take the time to learn about my students’ cultural identities as the courses progress. Through our discussions and my reflective assignments, they reveal their interests, prior knowledge, and current needs as learners.

When I take the time to connect with my students genuinely, I revisit my course goals and objectives throughout the semester. I revise assignments based on student gaps and interests. At times, I feel that it drives some of my students crazy. However, as a culturally responsive teacher educator, I believe that it is important to be tuned into your students as you teach. In other words, as you teach, you should be scaffolding their learning. At times, that means modifying or eliminating certain assignments. This has allowed me to embrace and enhance the lived experiences, cultures, and funds of knowledge that my students bring with them to the classroom.

**KC:** Now that we’ve talked about how you consider yourself to be a culturally responsive teacher educator. Can you tell me how you have grown as a culturally responsive teacher educator throughout your career?

**MBG:** I’m glad that you’ve asked such a question. I believe that to be an effective culturally responsive teacher, one must be willing to be a lifelong and reflective learner. In doing so, one acknowledges that being a teacher requires on-going personal and professional growth. Over the years, as a culturally responsive teacher educator, I’ve grown in the following ways:

- Became more observant.
- Began using more evidence to base my teaching decisions.
- Attended conferences to stay abreast of research in different areas (not always easy when you are teaching 5-8 courses a semester on different topics/with different foci)
- Became more consciously skilled in modeling and being able to give examples to help students make connections.
- Learned to allow the wait time for my students to process information and give feedback on what they’ve understood about what was shared.
- Became more transparent with my expectations and grading.
- Developed analytic rubrics for almost every course assignment to eliminate the guesswork in how to get the A.
- Designed and implemented more socially conscious and culturally based assignments (e.g., such as WebQuests that examine crucial social issues).

**KC:** You mentioned earlier that you had grown as a culturally responsive teacher educator over the years. I’m wondering beyond yourself, your personal and professional growth, who benefits from culturally responsive practices?

**MBG:** That’s a powerful question that I believe all culturally responsive teacher educators should ask themselves. I believe schools are becoming increasingly more diverse (culturally, linguistically, racially, and ethnically),...
not just in urban areas. While everyone can be enlightened when they learn the value of treating others respectfully and equitably, it is historically marginalized people who benefit most from others learning about culturally responsive teaching practices.

Remember, culturally responsive teaching is all about embracing, respecting, and including students’ cultural references and lived experiences in all aspects of learning. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings has been arguing this for years through her research and scholarship. Therefore, despite the social disparities and inequities that plague our schools, culturally responsive teaching provides our children and youth with the chance to develop their literacy, mathematical, technological, social, and political skills.

**KC:** Earlier, you described how you approach your teacher education curriculum through a culturally responsive educator’s lens. At the moment, I’m wondering, and would like to know if you provide your teacher candidates with meaningful and professional learning experiences outside the classroom?

**MBG:** I’m glad you’ve asked this question. About three years ago, at my former institution, I helped students revive our Teacher Education Club and became their faculty advisor.

For the first time in the club’s history, members of the executive board and club members were able to fundraise money to attend the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) Convention in Atlantic City. That particular unique experience provided our teacher candidates with the chance to socially interact and learn from other New Jersey pre-service and in-service teachers. To me, culturally responsive teaching is also about providing teacher candidates with the opportunity to apply their coursework experience outside of the classroom—in a professional setting. They also need the ability to network and collaborate with their peers. Attending that conference opened opportunities for them.

The following year, someone else was asked to advise them; however, the executive board continued to seek me out. We spent many nights in my office discussing the state of education, and in particular, teacher education. Some members of the group decided to next lead our teaching honor society chapter, *Kappa Delta Pi*. Our conversations motivated them to organize our institution’s first-ever culturally responsive teaching conference. The conference gathered in-service and pre-service teachers and teacher education professors from nearby colleges and universities. This student-organized conference provided participants with the opportunity to learn from other experienced culturally responsive teacher education professors, such as Dr. Ana María Villegas and Dr. Monica Taylor from Montclair State University.

Teaching in a space where many espoused color blindness was not an easy experience; the micro and macro aggressions there … anyway, listening to the students use culturally inclusive language, witnessing the growth of their communication and leadership skills made me feel like a proud parent since I taught all of them since their freshmen year.

Being a culturally responsive teacher educator, I truly believe that it is crucial to provide our teacher candidates with meaningful professional learning experiences to nurture them as future educators.

**KC:** Based on your experience and expertise, should teacher educators, teachers, school leaders, and all other stakeholders advocate for culturally responsive and sustaining education for all urban children and youth?

**MBG:** I believe that today, more than ever before, as a nation, we need to recognize that our schools are becoming increasingly more diverse. For that very reason, advocating for culturally responsive and sustaining education for our children and youth is a must! We must acknowledge that they all possess meaningful knowledge and lived experiences that are crucial for their personal and professional growth, and most importantly, their academic success.

**KC:** In what other ways do you find yourself advocating for culturally responsive teaching and sharing your experiences and expertise?

**MBG:** Whenever possible, I share my experiences, expertise, and advocate for culturally responsive teaching at professional conferences held at my former institution (e.g., their annual Teachable Tuesday Conference for their pre-service teacher candidates) and through professional organizations. Many of those workshop sessions have centered on culturally responsive teaching. For example, I’ve led many workshops at the New Jersey Council for Exceptional Children (NJCEC) annual conferences.
KC: Earlier we've discussed why you believe that we need to advocate for culturally responsive teaching and sustaining education in our urban schools as a society. To end our conversation today, I'm wondering what your thoughts are on professional development opportunities for teachers? Can they serve as a way to advocate for more culturally responsive schools?

MBG: First, thank you for asking such a question. To me, it is a very personal and reflective question. As a culturally responsive teacher educator and educational consultant, I've led professional development workshops centered on culturally responsive teaching for early childhood school leaders in Newark, New Jersey, as well as for coaches, teachers, and assistants in New Haven, Connecticut, as a consultant through Bank Street College of Education. Last spring, this work also included coaching school leaders in observing and facilitating culturally responsive practices in their teachers through classroom visits with them.

This spring, I assumed a different role supporting culturally relevant and sustaining education under the mentorship of my dissertation sponsor at [Teachers College], Dr. Michelle Knight-Manuel. Authors of Classroom Cultures: Equitable Schooling for Racially Diverse Youth (2018), Dr. Knight-Manuel, and Dr. Joanne Marciano, led interactive, culturally relevant, and sustaining education professional development workshops for teachers, social workers, school counselors, and school leaders in Newark, New Jersey. Participants explored their lived experiences and how they impacted their interactions with students. Knight-Manuel and Marciano also shared culturally relevant practices they have observed in teachers through their work in New York City.

During these workshops, I learned more about educators' perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy across the generations since participants were diverse in professional experiences. I believe it is essential to provide both veteran and novice teachers with opportunities to share their voices in safe spaces. In other words, share their knowledge and express their concerns they may have when it comes to implementing research-based, culturally relevant best practices, especially in these racially charged times. The timing of our workshops allowed us to process the deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery. We also discussed the growing social justice movement around the world to end injustice when it comes to policing. Our conversations led to how to discuss social justice and inequality in classrooms with our students.

Participants worked in groups to develop action plans to implement culturally relevant and sustaining school-wide practices to increase student engagement and achievement. This fall, I am looking forward to witnessing how the schools enact those plans even in the midst of COVID-19.

For three decades I have been at the forefront of leading others to examine their practices as they interact with others. When you are doing the work, it is challenging to reflect on or document its impact. Through assisting Drs. Knight-Manuel and Marciano, I've become an observer, listening more to how the power of culturally responsive teaching and sustaining education can help our youth become more active participants and advocates in their own educational experiences. The field of education is finally moving forward in re-centering students as learners. Now that COVID-19 essentially wiped out standardized testing and leveled practices which allowed schools to suspend and expel students, we have hope.

References

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Research Perspectives in Urban Education
Culturally Responsive and Sustaining STEM Curriculum as a Problem-Based Science Approach to Supporting Student Achievement for Black and Latinx Students

This article explores the tenets of culturally responsive STEM curriculum, providing an innovative look into STEM teaching and learning, which illuminates student agency, prior knowledge, and positive connections with their teachers. It seeks to answer the question, what happens when students experience informal STEM learning spaces as positive ones that enable them to develop a sense of agency, voice, and academic achievement.

“To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin...” — bell hooks

Four distinct problems cause many Black and Latinx students to lack persistence and success in STEM and therefore call for a new curricular approach to STEM education: 1. Black and Latinx students enter into secondary STEM learning spaces with gaps in knowledge; 2. Black and Latinx students lack early exposure to STEM education; 3. The students’ existing funds of knowledge of STEM concepts are not often acknowledged or utilized in the classroom; and 4. Students lack a connection to their experiences and the STEM content, thereby stunting their academic identity.

Researchers have uncovered many reasons as to why Black and Latinx students do not persist in STEM. Perna et al. (2009) attribute the barriers to STEM success to “inadequate academic preparation by elementary and secondary schools, inefficient attention to the psychological barriers that limit persistence in STEM fields, and inadequate support by colleges and universities” (pp. 2-4). The lack of success in STEM and the perceived declining persistence in STEM for Black and Latinx students is attributed to the social barriers they face within their academic environments, or the lack of preparation they received prior to entering the STEM program.

Research also suggests that Black and Latinx students do not perform well in science classrooms or perform well on assessments focused on the epistemological basis of knowledge construction of science and indigenous science. Cajete (1988) describes indigenous science as one where “the American Indian students possess a cultural worldview that is significantly different from that of American society at large. This, in turn, affects students’ perceptions and receptivity to science and math” (p. 2). Alternatively, Snively & Corsiglia (2001) describes Western modern science as that which is adopted by “science educators who have long assumed that only Western modern scientific knowledge was true knowledge” (p. 24). Still, further, Aikenhead & Ogawa (2007) view science practiced by Native American students as conflicting with Western modern science, and as a result, science teachers (as well as teachers trained in the computer science, engineering, and mathematics disciplines) often may not acknowledge the funds of scientific knowledge possessed by those students, thus rendering this knowledge as invalid scientific knowledge.

To address this gap in curricular solutions, I argue that there exists a need to address the lack of student early exposure to STEM and the way that computer science, science, and engineering are taught in the classroom so that more students can
realize success in STEM and thrive in those learning spaces.

To address this gap in curricular solutions informed by research, I designed a curriculum that engages with students in order for them to realize success in STEM. This new curricular approach presents opportunities for students to bring their culture and prior funds of knowledge into the classroom in order to bridge it with STEM content. How might doing things differently, in terms of utilizing the prior knowledge, cultural experiences, and the established or emerging achievements of Black and Latinx students within PreK-12 learning spaces enhance STEM knowledge acquisition?

**Background and Conceptual Framework: The Case for a More Culturally Responsive and Sustaining STEM Curriculum**

What is needed in classrooms, particularly urban classrooms is a culturally responsive STEM curriculum that is both an explicit and implicit curriculum and recognizes that different kinds of cultures exist within the classroom and that culture is not just a construct derived from ethnicity or nationalism. I further maintain that a culturally responsive curriculum is a practical tool that complements the culturally responsive pedagogical research in the field today and is responsive to students’ culture and intersectional identities. Further, this curriculum design recognizes the varied cultures of students in the classroom and is grounded in culturally responsive teaching, with the added layer of modifying teaching strategies in the STEM classroom. The rationale behind this is so that the dominant, westernized modes of teaching that often silence and implicitly oppress do not pose a hindrance to the learning of Black and Latinx students.

Further, a culturally responsive STEM curriculum creates a balanced relationship with students, whereby the teacher is the guide, facilitator, or even a learner participant within

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the classroom. Still, further, it challenges racial stereotypes by introducing contributions to the STEM fields from a culturally responsive sensitivity lens and an intersection of people who may not otherwise be regarded as contributors to the progress in STEM fields. I envision a culturally responsive STEM curriculum as one that addresses issues, within the curricular content, learning artifacts, and problem-based, real-world challenges that may arise from the racism that has affected the environment, the health of certain classes of people, the medical advances or setbacks, and the implications behind these technological advances.

Adjapong maintains that “Scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1995) and most recently Paris and Alim (2017) have argued for culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies” (p. 15). I concur and maintain that culturally sustaining pedagogies prompts STEM educators to go beyond the culturally relevant and responsive to embody the “valuing and maintenance of our multiethnic and multilingual society” (Paris, 2012, p. 2). I posit that the use of both culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum in STEM learning spaces serves as an explicit resistance to the hegemonic practices often found in Western Modern Science and in other STEM disciplines that are framed in dominant culture narrative.

The curriculum I developed serves as a consideration for using, to support our multicultural and multilingual students in STEM learning spaces. This project is rooted in a framework I designed called Culturally Responsive Aesthetic Learning Constructionist Model (Figure 1.0), which explores culturally responsive pedagogy, a constructionist learning model, and aesthetic learning theory. Culturally responsive pedagogy is derived from Gay’s distinction of culturally responsive teaching, which is defined as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (Gay, 2010, p. 106). Constructionism supports student-centered learning that enables students to discover and extend their learning from information and experiences they already know. Further, this framework originates from the work of Seymour Papert (1980/1993), who studied under cognitive development scholar, Piaget, and who regarded students as “epistemologists who are the active builders of their own intellectual structures” (Papert, 1980/1993, p. 19). The curriculum is developed using themes that are comprised of Aesthetic Learning Theory, which is akin to a constructionist model and enables students to have “aesthetically-engaged learning experiences” (Uhrmacher, 2009, p. 613) in the classroom. I designed a conceptual model to support the development of the curriculum. The model shows how both the student and teacher are joined in an equal stratum that supports teachers in using differentiated teaching strategies to support students with multiple intelligences.

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I suggest supporting students in developing a STEM identity and foundations for academic success in STEM learning spaces. STEM identity is the process of how Black and Latinx students can form an internalized association to STEM as they realize success in STEM learning spaces, make connections between themselves and the STEM content, and are introduced to others from their culture who are successfully engaged in STEM majors and professions. In framing the curriculum in the pedagogical and learning theories presented, I aim to reduce the social barriers and lack of preparation that Black and Latinx students often face in STEM programs and to enable these students to develop a positive STEM identity for themselves that will result in their active participation in STEM learning spaces.

The model is designed so that one or more of the five culturally responsive themes that I designed emerge within the learning space, as a result of the successful utilization of the model. The purpose of the tenets is to link culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies to the STEM curriculum I designed that is highlighted in this article. The intention is to integrate the themes that emerge from the tenets into the world of curriculum design. There is no room to discuss the details of the tenets, as this is a topic for another article; however, the following summary presents the salient points of the tenets that can be used for curriculum design, in order to frame the curriculum in culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies. The STEM curriculum I created using the tenets is an example of an innovative approach to using culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogical strategies toward design and implementation of curriculum.

Tenets of Culturally Responsive and Sustaining STEM Curriculum

The following tenets are a basis for developing a culturally responsive and sustaining STEM curriculum, to promote student achievement utilizing the funds of knowledge and cultural achievements of students:

1. **Use Culture to Promote A STEM Identity.** For a more equitable climate to exist for the ethnically and linguistically diverse students in the classroom, the curriculum and instructional practices must be examined, and the pedagogy of the instructor must be questioned by the instructor. This questioning leads to the emergence of critical pedagogy, which will then lead to an amended awareness, enabling her to examine her power in society, in the classroom, and the effects such power may have upon the students’ sense of self and their ability to learn.

The concept of STEM identity is informed by Zirkel (2002), who posits that “representations of opportunity are correspondingly encoded in the identities they form in adolescence, and [they] pursue only that which they imagine as possible” (p. 358). Freeman and Freeman (2004) present the idea that through the inclusion of culturally relevant texts into the curriculum and classroom, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds learn to understand the content in the books more fully, as well as develop a clearer identity of who they are through the connection with those texts.

2. **Promote Critical Thinking and Discourse.** Using this theme will enable students to use their culture, their living environment, and their academic environment as a backdrop to acquiring knowledge around history, social studies, the sciences, and a host of other disciplines, that will be influenced by the cultural experiences and funds of knowledge of each student. Moll and Gonzalez (1994) refer to this as students using their ‘funds of knowledge’ to refer to historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (133).

3. **Create a More Inclusive and Equitable Classroom Culture.** A heterogeneous cooperative grouping of learners, combined with culturally responsive programming of instruction is required, to not only support the ELL and IEP students who may be pulled out for daily specialized instruction but also to create an inclusive community of learners who are supportive of those who miss part of the lesson conducted in a general population classroom. Gay (2013) posits that “[the] emphasis on “teaching to” cultural diversity helps students acquire more accurate knowledge about the lives, cultures, contributions, experiences, and challenges of different ethnic and racial groups in U.S. society, knowledge that is often unrecognized or denigrated in conventional schooling” (p. 49).

4. **Use Cultural Responsiveness and Sustaining Practices to Promote Student Achievement.**
Having a focus on culturally responsive and instruction for ethnically and linguistically diverse populations is central to the promotion of student achievement. Gay (2013) views culturally responsive teaching as a way to provide an equitable opportunity to accept differences among students of diverse cultures without attaching problems and pathologies to the culture - but instead to view the cultural differences as assets to enrich the learning spaces. Students will thereby interpret that the inclusion of their culture indicates that they are cared about, thus creating a space by which learning can be promoted.

5. **Promote Intellectual Strategies to Promote Active Learning.** Culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy and participatory practices that include the students and their culture will help ensure that not only will the students receive affirmation that their culture is responsive within the school structure, but they will also receive affirmation that they are included and accepted in the school culture, and are an important central element to their learning achievement. Paris (2012) argues for “[supporting] young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95).

It is my goal that through the use of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks and curricular approaches that students realize the evolution of their STEM skills and knowledge constructs from positive experiences in their STEM learning environments and that their STEM identity is actualized from their experiences, work, and products created from the lessons that nurture problem-solving, critical thinking, and ingenuity.

**The Curriculum Design**

I created a culturally responsive and sustaining, problem-based, aesthetically driven STEM curriculum. This curriculum aims to teach critical reasoning, computational thinking, problem-solving, and inclusive design thinking skills. Moreover, the curriculum design engages students using inclusive, culturally responsive methodologies that are framed within aesthetic learning themes, to enable students to construct skills that allow them to continue a path of lifelong learning. The purpose of the curriculum design is to empower teachers to create a learning space that is inclusive for multiple modes of learners and to ensure that their lesson plans are facilitated in culturally responsive ways that support student cultures, student preferred learning styles, and the varied multiple intelligences of their students, to allow their students to develop a deeper connection to the STEM academic content. The explicit purpose is to support students in developing and broadening skills in engineering, computer science, science, and creative technologies. Further, the curriculum aims to support students in attaining confidence in the STEM fields through the development of their own STEM identity, to develop deeper interests in STEM, and improve learning outcomes. These intended outcomes are presented in lesson plans that use what Carrier (2011) terms as “effective strategies for teaching science vocabulary. The job of science education is to teach students how to use thematic patterns of science to communicate meanings, talking science to solve problems in writing or speaking about issues in which science is relevant” (p.1). Further, the curriculum aims to enable students to experience doing and being science (or computer science or engineering) through hands-on, problem-based learning that enables them to make sense of what is taking place in their lab activity, or while coding and debugging their app, or through engineering and testing a structure. It is through this method of experiential learning that students will acquire the natural way of deriving the vocabulary. Teachers who facilitate the curriculum can:

> [P]romote students’ dialogue as they have instructional conversations. We need to provide students with opportunities to use their colloquial language and translate back and forth with scientific and technical terms. We can use this strategy, called interlanguage, to discuss the different explanations of the students’ experiences in the classroom. (Carrier, 2011, p. 2)

As an example of a method to support students in using thematic patterns in engineering to make meaning of concepts, is if students were engaged in developing a roller coaster, then...
students would learn about potential and kinetic energy at the moment they experience the concept of those types of energy during the build or test of the roller coaster - students will learn that objects have their greatest potential energy at the peak of the highest part of the roller coaster, and, through various lab tests, will understand the concept of kinetic energy when the object barrels down the incline of the roller coaster. Such strategies are responsive to the learning needs of all students, regardless of their English proficiency level, as they are given adequate time in a learning space to expand their STEM funds of knowledge they need to persist and thrive in STEM courses and activities.

The curriculum design also presents, through its pedagogical strategies, outlined for teachers to use, a space for discussion regarding who is participating and benefiting versus who isn’t and why as it relates to technological and innovative advances in society. Moreover, the curriculum design provides for the promotion and encouragement of active student participation in STEM learning spaces and empowers students to utilize both their cultural voice and evolving STEM proficiency to contribute as full participants in STEM environments who demonstrate a sense of belonging. In addition, the curriculum is designed in a way that integrates the STEM domains of science, computer science, engineering, and creative technologies, thereby resulting in the development and implementation of interdisciplinary lesson plans and teaching strategies. Lastly, the curriculum is developed with the cultural background and prior experiences of its students placed at the forefront of its design.

On the other hand, teaching the students from a transdisciplinary position also enables students to develop a holistic knowledge construct from using two or more STEM disciplines within the same unit of study to produce a product or engage in a problem-based challenge. The curriculum provides a platform that carefully instructs the reader on ways to envision a culture more broadly than simply one revolving around race.

**Curriculum Implementation**

Before the curriculum implementation, I met with my teaching team to engage in a series of exercises that enabled us to reflect upon and discuss as a collective our pedagogical strategies, biases, value systems, and levels of understanding of the culture of our students and the various cultures within our team. Utilizing Carol Rodgers’ (2002) four-phase reflective cycle (Figure 2), we explored the roles of our presence in classrooms, described and discussed classrooms we have taught in and analyzed our teacher/student talk ratio (as best as we could remember), the content of previous STEM lessons, and what was said, and what we have done to experiment with different methods of teaching, to slow down and attend to student learning in a more personal, human way. In addition, upon utilizing

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**Figure 2:** Carol Rodgers’ Reflective Cycle

the reflective cycle we agreed that we would solicit structured feedback from our students so we can begin to distinguish between what we think we are teaching and the knowledge that students are acquiring. We agreed to take seven to ten minutes at the end of every lesson to solicit feedback, as well as give space for the students to share their thoughts on the lesson.

The culturally responsive and sustaining STEM curriculum was implemented through a STEM afterschool program facilitated by STEM Kids NYC, a 5-year-old nonprofit organization I founded and currently serve as the Executive Director. STEM Kids NYC provides PreK-12 STEM programs in computer science, science, engineering, and robotics and serves school, community-based, and corporate partners, whereby it offers weekly STEM afterschool programming, summer camp, and weekend events in and around the New York City, Queens, Bronx, and Brooklyn communities. The students who participated in the curriculum implementation project featured in this article were approximately 25 high school students who identified as female and who belonged to the following cultural groups: African, Asian, Latinx, and White. The students attended either specialized high schools or public schools in New York City that were considered top-performing schools. The setting was a well known community-based organization, located in midtown Manhattan, and was an afterschool site of STEM Kids NYC. The students registered on their own for the STEM program and were not provided any incentives to be a part of the program.

Observations, Student Feedback, and Themes That Emerged

The following section represents observations and themes that emerged from analyzing feedback from students. This feedback came from structured surveys and informal interviews that were organized around particular approaches that were either used throughout the curriculum implementation project or were generated as a result of the weekly sessions with the students.

Students Used Risk-Taking, Sensory Experience, and Connections to Acquire Knowledge

Testimonials that emerged from a survey given to student participants, after a robotics lesson, and whose names are listed as pseudonyms to protect their identity, revealed that students used persistence, hands-on experiences as tinkerers, and solving problems with their peers to support their knowledge acquisition:

Brittany: I enjoyed it a lot. We did hard, yet satisfying work that was explained well.

Jessica: I loved my experience at the program. I learned a lot and it was very fun to connect something I love STEM to other stuff I love, like art. My favorite part was probably building things like robots. I never expected myself to create something that worked so well with my own two hands.

Marta: There was a lot of troubleshooting that happened, but I got to learn more about engineering, it introduced me to a lot of information that I wasn't able to learn in school.

Francine: I got to work with a lot of materials that I would otherwise probably have never been able to work with. I am happy I got the opportunity to experience this at some point in my life and what I was most excited about was the Ozobot robot and maze project. In addition to that, we were able to work with batteries and circuits as well as small LED panels.

Helene: It was very interesting to learn about the circuit and how to use Ozobots since I haven't had the opportunity to practice anything in the STEM field anywhere else.

Amy: Being in this program has allowed me to see the potential with myself; I was surrounded with such amazing and inspiring individuals which helped motivate me to do my very best. I learned how to connect my creativity with computing and circuits.

Beatrice: I liked it. I thought it was very informative and also exposed me to different tools in the STEM field that I don't think I would have otherwise found out about. For example, coming into this I had known nothing about Ozobots but this helped me understand it better and the different skills associat-
ed with using them. I also found it nice to work with the women helping run the program because it was inspiring to see women interested in and working in the STEM field.

Upon review of the narratives of the above students, it’s clear that the STEM project created a positive impact on the students, and their testimonials revealed in their narratives that their STEM identities were either formed or strengthened. “An identity is a “general sense of self with reference to groups or particular content” (Renninger 2009, p. 109). In other words, an identity develops in relation to and through interactions with others, making identity inherently social in nature. In the past decade, science education scholars have been examining science identity with the framework proposed by Carlone and Johnson (2007). The feedback from the students reveals that the teachers and I used the STEM content and differentiated their teaching strategies to enable them to utilize various aesthetic learning themes, with an emphasis on their being comfortable with taking risks. Many students shared their willingness to try something they had never done before, thereby showing evidence that the learning environment enabled them to develop their knowledge constructs by taking risks. In addition, the students were afforded the freedom to use their sensory experience in the hands-on activities, as well as their connections with the STEM academic content to tinker with the robots and increase their knowledge acquisition on robotics.

**Culturally Responsive Data Supported Students in Their Developing Their Critical Thinking, Interest in STEM, and Sociopolitical Consciousness**

I maintain that culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies can be used to further discussions in the field of education regarding ways to support students in developing identity, student voice, and critical consciousness. In one of our sessions, where I began an introduction to virtual reality and augmented reality programming, I facilitated a discussion that enabled our students to brainstorm issues that affected women and girls specifically. The intent of the virtual reality and augmented reality lesson was to promote critical thinking, discourse, and sociopolitical consciousness. I began our session with the customary introduction of a STEM cultural female icon: Ashley Baccus, who is a black woman and a neuroscientist, and created a virtual reality experience that enables the user to understand the experiences of black women in a hair salon, to bring attention to racial prejudice.

After the students viewed the video, they brainstormed their ideas on what their virtual reality program would do to educate members of our society about a particular prejudice or microaggression. Ideas discussed throughout the class centered on issues involving domestic violence, date rape, body image, and social media and privacy.

After the students learned to program their own virtual reality experiences, they supported each other by sharing other ideas to further improve the designs of each others’ program. The result was a series of virtual reality or augmented reality designs that provided education and awareness on issues they felt adversely affected girls and women. One student commented, “I am pleased that I can showcase my ideas in this way. I never thought of the social perspective of what we are working on.”

After the virtual reality and robotics projects were complete, I engaged with the students in a forum, to allow them to create discourse with each other, examine and analyze each other’s projects. In this activity, I wanted to explore how the students used their critical consciousness to apply it to analyzing phenomena that centered on giving females voice and freedom to speak out about social issues that affected women. Some of our student participants’ responses were:

Sara: *Something I’m excited about is continuing to learn these robots and it’s really fun.*

Mona: *I want to give a shout out to my neighbor because we had some great ideas and it turned out to work nicely. It was very fun.*

Asia: *I felt inspired by the video we watched earlier about the roboticist and how she made her technology more associated with the social impacts and community. So I’m thinking of myself that the robots here are kind of small but I see it as a start. So I think it’s cool.*
Though many of the observations and analysis from the interviews did not reveal students’ developing social consciousness, the analysis did reveal that students who acquired STEM knowledge through the development of their knowledge constructs were empowered to persist in the STEM learning space and gradually formed a STEM identity for themselves. Student respondents completed an end of lesson survey after an engineering lesson that had posed a challenge to some students, due to our introducing tools to complete the lesson that was unfamiliar to some. Further, it is clear many students persisted and renewed their confidence in themselves as students who were capable of success in STEM:

Jackie: I like the idea that I can do engineering. My favorite part at the [afterschool site] is that I can learn from myself when troubleshooting. I feel very much in control and it helps because I’m a visual learner.

Clara: I don’t take science classes at school, but I do enjoy the experiments we do at the [afterschool site]. My favorite activity was drawing the maze and having my robots run across them.

Jules: I personally love/prefer to do experiments and presenting ideas because I am not a great test-taker. This is also why the [afterschool] is great. I get to partake in science without having to worry about an exam grade.

Sadiya: I liked formulating our own experiments and labs that we get to analyze ourselves. Working with others to develop systems and circuits made our daily tasks easier to do.

Bella: I got a little frustrated when it wasn’t working but I think it was still exciting because I was figuring out with my partner and everybody around me. That was nice. The fact that we were all frustrated but working through was cool.

The observations and the data analysis show that, as a result of having the freedom of bridging their prior knowledge to the academic content and working within a context to be able to take risks, as well as fail without negative consequences or judgment, our students developed positive connections with their teachers and experienced their informal STEM learning space as a positive one that enabled them to develop a voice, a STEM identity, and an experience of a sense of achievement in completing labs and activities they once found difficult.

Conclusion

Even though urban classrooms are comprised of students from diverse cultures, there is often evidence of a lack of inclusion or equity within the learning environment. This mismatch often results in a deterioration of possibilities for student engagement and learning. Urban classrooms are often comprised of students who wish to learn and who wish to be supported in their knowledge acquisition.

When there exists a lack of student knowledge acquisition and support in the classroom, there is often a maelstrom of events generated that quietly erode the possibilities for student academic achievement, and this erosion is more demonstrative for underrepresented students, particularly students of color. Irvin et al. (1997) posit that “any given student’s quality of motivation reflects an interaction of characteristics of the individual and the environment surrounding her or him” (p.41). Further, “too many students of color have not been achieving in school as well as they should (and can) for far too long [and] this disempowerment must stop[,] Classroom teachers and other educators need to understand that achievement or lack thereof, is an experience or an accomplishment. It is not the totality of a student’s personal identity” (Gay, 2010, p.1).

Within academia, there exists an increase in research and academic reporting on the need for more culturally relevant or responsive instruction in STEM education, calls for supporting multiple epistemologies in STEM education, evidence of innovations in science-based education that advance school achievement in students of color, and even calls for diversity and culture in the evaluation of STEM efforts that seek to improve STEM outcomes for underrepresented groups.

The core element that will support the success of a widely used culturally responsive STEM curriculum will be the existence of a collaboration between students, educators, families, community partners, STEM professionals, and policymakers who are all engaged with
each other to bridge the gap between school curriculum and the immediate need for schools to prepare students for STEM skills that can lead to further academic exploration through a STEM major, acquisition of a STEM job, and/or forming a STEM identity, thereby leading to possibilities for academic achievement.

References


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We are interested in the ways that COVID-19 has disrupted the normalcy of oppression and inequity and the possibilities for Black liberation in this new context. We, The Black Liberation in Education and Society (BLESS) Research Collective, are a collective of researchers and practitioners who work collaboratively to generate data, uplift knowledge, and inform actions for school and community practitioners to reduce harm to Black students, center Black joy, and be steeped in liberatory and emancipatory practices. We believe that when teaching and learning is rooted in an emancipatory and liberating praxis, that educational spaces will become spaces of freedom for all in the community. As such, we work to highlight and uplift practices that are anti-racist, that decenter whiteness, that eradicate anti-Blackness, that uplift and center Black joy, that center Black students and families and embrace a decolonial pedagogy. The BLESS Collective is composed of six educators: four researchers and two practitioners who support school leaders in a large, urban school district. We are four Black women, one Black man, and one white man.

We sent an invitation out to members of a larger urban school district community in the northeastern United States in order to get a fair representation of different voices and perspectives. Invitations went out to school and district leaders, community-based organization (CBO) partners, alumni, and teachers. We had eight participants (see appendix) who responded and participated, including 1 high school teacher, 4 district leaders, 2 young adults that were alumni of a district high school, and 1 CBO liaison who is also a former district leader. Participants represented diverse racial backgrounds, including 2 Black women, 1 Afro-Asian-Latinx woman, 1 Afro-latinx woman, 1 latinx man, 1 latinx woman, 1 white man, and 1 white woman.

The participants were then divided into two focus groups based on schedule availability of 3 and 5 and were asked to consider the urgency and possibility of now in the context of ongoing racial uprisings, persistent anti-Blackness, and the global impact of COVID-19. Using a semi-structured approach, we considered three broad questions: (1) “How can we think about what we must/can do now?”; (2) “How are we approaching self-care?”; (3) “What can we think about for the future?” Focus groups lasted 90 minutes. Five themes emerged from coding and data analysis of focus group transcripts: Black liberatory practices, whiteness, self-care, metacognition about practices, and culturally responsive-sustaining education. We highlight these themes below, pulling representative quotes that capture the essence and flow of the conversation. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the participants.

On Black Liberatory Practices:

Amaya (former school leader): We always started with a space of reflection and meditation and grounding ourselves in the
present moment. Sadly, for, I’d say about the last five years that I was a principal, we came back to the realities of Trayvon Martin, we came back to the reality of Charlottesville, we came back to the reality of systemic racism, the loss of Black life, right. And we still started there and always planted the seeds for us to engage in curriculum writing and creating structures that upheld Black and Brown joy, freedom, and liberation.

Brian (current high school teacher): Being Black has meant being under attack from our educational system, [and] from our government. And so, if you don’t acknowledge that, and that doesn’t inform the decisions you make in a classroom, then you shouldn’t be a teacher and, you shouldn’t be a teacher in The District, where most of the children staring back at you will be different. It will be People of Color.

Julian (current district leader): We understand that this COVID[-19 pandemic] has a long tail and a ripple effect. And you know, a lot of People of Color, a lot of my Black brothers and sisters and Spanish brothers and sisters from different communities, a neighbor could die, and it could hit their heart in a different way. And some educators don’t understand, right? They want to know, did your mom die? Did your father die? But when you live in a community where everybody is auntie and everybody’s uncle and everybody’s cousin, we have to make sure that we are doing wellness checks and understanding not just how their nuclear family is doing, but how their communities [are] doing and also being an ambassador and liaison and bridge to support other sister agencies in supporting our families in most need.

Danielle (former district leader and current community based organization liaison): I’ve been trying to keep myself from like doing the Shock Doctrine thing with this in terms of changing schools, but at the same time, like the elimination of standardized tests that happened last year, I think is one of the most powerful transformative occurrences that could be built on to really create equitable schools that do not continue sort of the historical oppression of Black people in this country.

Like standardized testing, I could go on forever, but it is built on anti-Black racism. It has reinforced anti-Black racism for years and, it needs to be gone. And it was last year. And it illustrated, I think, the ways in which schools organize themselves around structures that ensure the persistence of anti-Black racism because people were confused about what to do when the tests stop existing. And so I think that if the policymakers would take the step now to eliminate the standardized tests for this year, because we know that they will be even more inequitable than they ever were before, and allow schools to teach students and not standardized and not like standardized test curriculum. I think that that is a powerful, powerful idea that could move us forward in this work. I’ll leave it at that.

Angela (school leadership coach and staff developer): And the second thing as I was listening to you guys speak is in the connection for me is our Indigenous practices are based on rituals, and we learned rituals from grieving to celebrations. And because even grieving is a celebration of something that was but no longer is. We all know transitions are a part of life. It’s not like it begins here and ends there. So all that I think that in that process are by creating the new normal by creating a new way of being by creating these possibilities that Amaya spoke about; we need to create something that grounds it. And we are traditionally grounded on rituals. That’s how we know things. That’s what is Indigenous. It has been taken away from us. But I think replaced by other rituals that are made not necessarily now are what we need. We need to return to that ancestry that and don’t put the elders to guide us there. And even in that, in itself is part of the liberatory practices. That’s how I somehow afford it.

Amaya (former school leader): The thing I want to say, it’s a focus on collectivism. And more collectivism, less individualistic thinking that’s rooted in white supremacy. I think honoring ancestors and elders celebrate, you know, embracing, rituals that center those who we serve. And I also want to say examining who gets to lead, and who determines what it means to like
be a leader, right. And so as principal, I looked at our leadership committee that had students, parent coordinators, assistant principals, parents, you know, and so like a really holistic representation of who makes up that community. And it wasn't based on your title, whether or not you were a leader or saw yourself as a leader. And so developing and investing in developing Indigenous leadership is a personal passion of mine.

As Brian noted above, “being Black has meant being under attack” and “schools organize themselves around structures that ensure the persistence of anti-Black racism.” Our participants noted the ways in which anti-Blackness is present in schools and the oppression that students of color, and in particular, Black students and families, face. In order to combat anti-Black racism, practitioners must adopt Black liberatory practices. Participants described how Black liberatory practices include practitioners starting from a place of acknowledging the historic disregard for and attack of Black life within and outside of schools. Black liberation also encompasses combating harmful practices, such as standardized testing, and affirming Black joy, freedom, rituals, community and ancestry. Amaya, provides a way forward through centering the voices and perspectives of Black and Brown people within the school, “We always started with a space of reflection and meditation and grounding ourselves in the present moment”. Are we centering the joy of Black students and families? Are we adopting indigenous practices that center community over individualism? Are we dismantling the structures that continue to oppress Black and Brown students? These are the approaches that schools and practitioners need to adopt.

On Whiteness:

Danielle (former district leader and current community-based organization liaison): So I’m thinking about one particular principal that I’ve been talking to a lot. He’s a white man. His faculty is predominantly white women; his student population, a vast majority of Black and Latinx students. And he has been struggling because he’s trying to figure out how to decenter whiteness in the reopening conversation. And it’s hard because the people in his most immediate sphere are all white people. And he can see from survey information that, say half of his families are interested in having their students come back into the school building at least partially in the fall. But half of his teachers are definitely not. So we’ve been holding town halls and a whole bunch of procedures to decenter the whiteness of the teachers that was driving this conversation, but it has been extraordinarily challenging for him. And like, you know, I’ve been trying to help him through this and I don’t at all feel like I’m an expert in how to do this either, but it is something that has come up in our conversations over and over again. How, as a white man, can you navigate that and how he can be really centering the voices of the Black families of his school in this conversation. And their needs. And their worries. And their hopes. And their fears as part of the conversation about reopening.

Amaya (former school leader): I too sat in a town hall meeting for a school. It was mainly the teachers, right. And one thing that I found to be really bothersome, and will get me to then like you know, where we may want to go, was that part of the town hall was a predominantly white teaching staff and school leadership staff wanting to have to create student-led town halls, or student town halls in some form, that aimed to repair the relationships between the school safety agents and police and students. Without acknowledging or interrogating where those relationships have been detrimental and harmful in the communities where that school lives, right, and particularly like, you know, for all of us. And so, we’re going into a school year, where once again, we’re experiencing another person—Jacob Blake, always say their names—who was shot seven times by police officers. We’re also witnessing an act of white supremacy that’s being protected by the powers that be. And it’s not being named, and it’s not being called out. Right. So you have a 17-year-old white supremacist who shoots two people at a rally in a protest. And so, if we are not examining and interrogating policies, and practices and historical harms, and the dynamics of white supremacy and the way in which it lives within our school systems, the ways in which it lives within...
our policing, then we are doing harm. And so for me, when I imagine a reopening, it is an examination of the dynamics of power, of positionality. It is looking at our policies and our structures and it is also as much as it is about hearing and creating spaces to hear the voices of Black and Brown staff members and students and community members, it is also about white folks doing their own work because we cannot be tapped on the shoulder and asked every time. What happened in the town hall I was in was that I was being asked to condone this wonderful plan that was, you know, to examine and repair the harm between safety agents and students, they; mean no harm. And I was, you know, I was very truthful and honest, in saying that power dynamics are also happening within classrooms and that you too are causing harm. Right. And so let’s be clear that it goes beyond the metal detector. It goes beyond that safety agent, and it walks into the curriculum where we are not represented in ways that are empowering, when we are not acknowledging the hurt, when we are not acknowledging that this dress code policy is harmful, when we’re not acknowledging that metal detectors are harmful. Right? And so I’m wondering if schools are planning to scan students for temperature as they enter, and a temperature check and a metal detector? And then will you be penalized if you’re late? Will you miss the class and then fail? And so what are the ways that I will continue to push this thinking and really push school leaders, particularly white folks, which is the majority of the system, The District and teaching staff, to really do your work with your folks, get your sister, get your cousin, get your friends, get your homies, get your aunts, and figure some stuff out? And allow us to like heal and not be the person that you’re going to every single time. And we are going to be traumatized time and time and time again.

Amaya (former school leader): Yeah, I think I’ve been in several conversations with the summer remote with school staff who are really much more invested in having students and community members behave and act in a more civilized way, if you will, so that their needs are met. And so for me, it further perpetuates harm. Because those of us who are hurting and have been engaged in this work for years, and those of us who are just starting to come to levels of consciousness around what’s happening, are then being silenced and in a very profound way, by not including us in the conversation, or by not including us in the curriculum, or ... where schools are focusing on. And so right now, there’s a huge emphasis on trauma-informed learning, which is really important and social-emotional learning, which I always understood to be on par and equally as important as academic and intellectual development, social-emotional development.

However, when it is rooted in the present, in the status quo, and what we’ve learned and engaged in these days when nothing shifts

And I think it will serve as an opportunity for if we don’t stop it, and if we’re not vocal about it, and if we’re not planning for it, to further indoctrinate students right and to create more harm. I’m saying, do things the right way, and you’ll get what you want to do things the right way and you too can be successful versus step back and analyze what’s been happening historically and what’s still lingers today. Right, step back, and then step in with real concrete actions that you will implement to dismantle what has been harming us for so many years and what will undo and then dismantling, but it’s also rebuilt, right? And so for me, there’s that combination of the two. But I have some serious concerns about this. Yes, COVID [-19] and the racial tensions that we are experiencing, and I wonder how many students will be further harmed by the racial, not by the racial tensions, but by the ways in which teachers and administrators will try to shift their perception. And so make them blame themselves and their community members versus having them understand why these conditions were here and created, to begin with.
and changes, I think it’s Dr. Dena Simmons who calls it white supremacy with a hug.

Whiteness is shorthand for systemic and structural white supremacy and the particular way it impacts an organization’s culture, policies, practices, and beliefs. As Amaya explained during the focus group, “and so let’s be clear that it goes beyond the metal detector. It goes beyond that safety agent, and it walks into the curriculum where we are not represented in ways that are empowering, when we are not acknowledging the hurt, when we are not acknowledging that this dress code policy is harmful, when we’re not acknowledging that metal detectors are harmful.” The act of decentering whiteness asks a community to recognize the harmful practices that exist and instead to center the voices and insight of Black families. White dominant culture is the default, and if you are not aware of it, you can’t decenter it. There is a tension that arises when you have a predominantly black and brown student body with a largely predominant white teaching force. Whose voices are being centered? Whose experiences are being valued? White supremacy with a hug is still white supremacy. There has to be intentionality in examining your practices, policies and beliefs. Schools need to be explicit in their decentering. Participants also described the need for white practitioners to not police Black youth and families and hold white practitioners accountable for harmful actions and practices.

On Self-Care:

Brian (current high school teacher): And then in terms of self-work, I think it has to do with like, you know, my wife and I have gotten a lot more active in you know, going to spaces to support like Black trans lives; we started marching and started going to events that you know— and that used to make me feel uneasy. Just something I never did before. And this summer really brought that out in terms of like the books I’m reading, the media that I’m consuming, so, you know, that’s sort of a long-winded version of what those two things are.

Danielle (former district leader and current community-based organization liaison): Just the idea that I do not judge myself and I do not judge other parents for the decisions that they are making for their kids has been the most important thing. Even when I’m feeling like other people are judging me, like I just don’t. Like I’ve just decided, like, I’m not going to judge myself...So I think that has been the most, I’m not trying to convince anybody of anything. And I’m gonna, I believe really, that everyone, every parent [at] this time really is making a decision, a very hard decision with the best interests of their kids at heart. So that’s been ...my self-care. Other than that, like, I also bought a treadmill.

Monica (Alumna of district high school, current college student): And that was the moment I realized I was like, what are things that make me happy? What are things that make me feel good about myself? What are things that make me just, what just sparks joy in my mind and my heart?

Gabriella: If I’m completely honest, like, I’m still struggling to find like ways to self-care. Because similar to Monica, I’ve always been like; I need to help someone. So I’m big on help. Like, what do you need? And I come last. And so I think that I’ve been like socialized and brought up like, okay, you take care of your siblings growing up when they were little, you take care of your cousins. And most of my family never went to college, I’m first-generation and so I’m that person that if they need something - it could be my aunt, my grandma, they call me like, Oh, I need to do this, I need you to call this.

Rose (former teacher, current school leadership coach): Something that Monica said stuck out to me and the concept of saying no, right? Something I’m trying to lean into, like, no is a complete sentence. Because I’m like you Monica. Yeah, yes, yes, yes. I’ll do it. I’ve always been a giver. And someone that’s always like, okay, I’ll do it. Sure. Like, even if I know it’s like, you know, for my own, like, you know, to my own detriment. So learning to say no, and just saying no, and letting that be the end of the sentence.

Amaya (former school leader): I think these are really tumultuous times, right? And...
so, on any given day, I can go from feeling like incredible moments of gratitude and reflection to feeling really broken and sad and dissolution in life, right? And so it's a combination of reading I think, you know, similar to like, I guess [like] most of us here, right, ... reading brings me joy and particularly reading writings by Black and Indigenous women. Taking walks with my children, and you know, eating and just honestly for me, the most important thing has been slowing down.

The participants’ reflection on self-care moves the conversation past the superficial symbolism that is often highlighted and hashtagged but lacks complexity and depth. There are a number of self-care challenges that this current moment brings, including the rollercoaster of emotions amid these distressing times and negotiating balancing caring for one's self and others at the same time. While some participants grappled with these challenges, others have emphasized being graceful with themselves and others during these times, learning to say “no” when at capacity, slowing down and centering the things that bring joy. As Monica explains, “what are things that make me happy? What are things that make me feel good about myself? What are things that make me just, what just sparks joy in my mind and my heart?”. How can practitioners and families keep joy and self-care at the center amid our uncertain and trying times?

On Metacognition about Practices:

Brian (current high school teacher):
And so, you know, I don’t have like a big beautiful answer so much as like, we got to communicate better, right? Like, I hope you all will go to more families and we’ll go to more people from all parts of this, you know, this discussion, to just see like, what is not working, what is working, and what could we dream of, what's the world we dream about?. And so I believe it comes a lot with sharing information and it comes a lot with putting people in positions where they can, you know, build relationships across schools and across districts and, honoring that.

Rose (former teacher, current school leadership coach): I think for me, I’m trying to come from, like center myself, to be able to be open to hearing the different concerns and perspectives of those who are in positions other than mine. Because that's the heart of equity work right is to be able to understand so that way we don't perpetuate those systems that oppress and harm.

Amaya (former school leader): You know, my heart breaks for principals this year. I think being a principal is what was, for me was the most challenging position ever, right? And it gave as much as it took away from you. And this year, with the level of uncertainty and the level of tension and particularly for Black and Brown school leaders who are committed to liberation, this is really traumatizing times. And so one I’ve heard from many principals is that they feel as though no one cares about them and whether or not they live or die. And so it is on them to care for themselves because they know that they are responsible for three hundred or two thousand young people. And there’s a lot of hurt and trauma, but no one has stopped, right? And folks are still showing up to lead the work and stay engaged and to hold themselves accountable. And so that’s what I’m getting. And I’m getting a sense of real exhaustion. And so I always find it, that it’s my place to sort of hold up a light of like possibility. Yes, this is true. And, here’s what we can do. So how do we hold space for one another?

School communities are living through an experience they weren’t prepared for; this particular school district isn’t alone in stumbling to find a solution. School leaders, families, faculty, and staff found themselves wondering what the ramifications of their decisions would be in the short and long term. Brian grappled with his school’s decisions, and wondered what voices were missing, “Like, I hope you all will go to more families and we’ll go to more people from all parts of this, you know, this discussion, to just see like, what is not working, what is working, and what could we dream of, what's the world we dream about?” Amaya reflected on the particular tension of holding space for and leading a school community, while feeling that no one is thinking about you, “And so one I’ve heard from many principals is that they feel as though no one cares about them and whether or not they live or die. And so it is on them to care for themselves because they know that
they are responsible for three hundred or two thousand young people.” How can a community reflect on the decisions they are making when they are under duress? Have we created the conditions to make good, thoughtful choices that center our most vulnerable children and young people?

**On CR-SE:**

Brian (current high school teacher): I’m a department leader at my school and the conversations were really about the amount and the extent of work to assign and what is reasonable. It was a shift away from grades being something that is punitive. But the conversation really was, it felt like a conversation about the soul of our school. If our students are experiencing trauma, how could we ever say that they failed to do an assignment? Or that they didn’t show mastery? Like, if they’re in a traumatic situation, how could we ever, with clear eyes put [failure] on a government document that lives with that young person for the rest of their life? And so there was an internal struggle at our school about what that means. And I think that that’s deeply linked to COVID [-19] and deeply linked to issues around you know, practices that help liberate people.

Julian (current district leader): Um, I think one of the things is not to minimize any of the parents’ decisions, right. And we’re gonna have some parents who, due to economic situations, employment situations, they have to send their kids to school. And we’re gonna have some parents who have the means and the outside family support to say that, you know, we’re going to be cautious, this is very dangerous. And we’re gonna have some parents who have the means and the outside family support to say that, you know, we’re going to be cautious, this is very dangerous. And we’re gonna have some strong opinions. And I just think that we need to provide space for grace, that no matter what kind of vibration tone, no matter, you know, where they [are] coming from, whether they believe that this is a conspiracy, whether they believe this leader is doing a good job, a bad job, but what they need to do, we need to come for a place where they’re not just tolerated, but they’re celebrated and supported. As you know, sometimes we can come with a lecturing tone, and just projecting our views of the zeitgeist and our views of what the school should be doing.

Amaya (former school leader): I made a commitment to myself to ground myself in my truth and love, right? And so always grounding myself in that space and in getting ready for school reopenings whatever that is, or will be, for me it’s being and actions that are also rooted in love and in a belief in the young people that we will engage with.

Julian (current district leader): Yeah, I think the school could be more of a place of education but also a place of healing. For a lot of people of color, school is not a pleasant place, right? And teachers can't wrap their head[s] around why they don’t like school, because most teachers grew up liking school. School was a place where they were celebrated. It was a place where they felt safe. And you know, me, I got kicked out of school, right? I like being in the football field; I like being in the park. I’d rather be in a barbecue all night, regardless of shootouts or not. I duck and I come back and I eat more hotdogs, right? And that's how I grew up, right. And I rather be in a place where there is [a] community. I rather be in a place where even we're matching our pain. And we realize that like, oh, you're dealing with that, and oh I’m dealing with that, and we’re supporting each other...And, so if schools could just be a lighthouse, and schools to understand that the body keeps score. And this, you know, trauma and epigenetic scaring and all this stuff that that's in the prefrontal cortex of everybody's mind now because of this tragedy and because of this election, I think if we can
leverage that and make that part of our new ethos make that part of our new norms. I think more families will come in. And once more families come in, and once that school begins to be a third place, where a family has a job, a family has a home and, a family’s comfortable in visiting a child’s school. I think; we’ll see more...more achievement and more Black and Brown students feeling more comfortable in school and realizing that this is a good place. This is not a place they have to be at, but this is a place they get to be at.

Amaya (former school leader): I think honestly, the most culturally responsive thing that anyone can do in reopening plans is to step back and listen to [the] community and listen to students. And listen and do. So get your nose out of chapter three of Ibram Kendi’s book and start doing. Stop reading. Stop quoting how many researchers you’ve read, and let me see that in action...We at the office are working with principals, teachers, folks who have been doing this for years, right? So stop asking me what to read. You know how to Google something, go Google it. Let me send you this, and stop asking me how to do it. I will do it because it is my job and my responsibility. But first and foremost, I’m here to serve Black and Brown communities, and that’s in educators and school leaders. That being said, the most culturally responsive-sustaining thing you can do is step back, listen to community, examine, interrogate what beliefs are existing within your policies and your school practices, and your curriculum. That’s my biggest thing, the most culturally responsive thing you can do.

The concept of schools as a place of healing speaks to the essence that is Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education. Imagine schools become this third place that Julian speaks of, imagine the possibilities. CR-SE brings forth the futurities of not just Black liberation and Black life, but also Black joy. And yet at the same time, we see that CR-SE risks becoming another buzzword, co-opted and set up to fail. Gabriella highlights how discourses around CR-SE should not detract from action and implementation around CR-SE while Amaya highlights the infrequency that schools and districts truly adopt its practices. Amaya also points the way for many educators who may feel stuck: That being said, the most culturally responsive-sustaining thing you can do is step back, listen to community, examine and interrogate your beliefs, examine, interrogate what beliefs are existing within your policies and your school practices, and your curriculum. That’s my biggest thing, the most culturally responsive thing you can do.
Listen and center, Black and Brown voices. Stop reading and start doing. For those truly looking for a place to start—listen, and center Black and Brown voices.

**Conclusion**

As Danielle highlighted above, “schools organize themselves around structures that ensure the persistence of anti-Black racism.” Pedagogical practices that center whiteness, stigmatize students of color, reproduce systemic racial inequities, and tacitly legitimize white supremacy as an educational approach are normal school practices (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CR-SE), a viable counter to deficit-centered pedagogy, is primarily concerned with embracing the countless resources that emerge from communities of color and positioning those resources as assets within the multicultural context of US education. CR-SE, while critical to elucidating the impact of similar patterns of white supremacy across racial and ethnic contexts, is ultimately limited in its usefulness in interrogating the specificity of Black life, conditions, and Black liberatory practices in education (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Educators, school and district leaders misunderstand it, view it as a checklist, or refuse to engage with it outright. This failure to engage fully with CR-SE, to name white supremacy and anti-Black racism, to explicitly center students in our schools, echo across generations and throughout the focus groups used in this study. As a result, the disproportionate impacts of everyday educational violence on Black students, educators, families, and communities continue to be overlooked. However, the educators here offer hope and a way forward, one rooted in the humanizing love that CR-SE and Black liberatory practices offer, if only schools would fully invest and commit to them.

**Suggested Next Steps:**

For educators, school leaders, students, and families this conversation may have affirmed aspects of their experience in schools, brought forth new information to consider, and caused the reader to ask, “now what?” We ask you to consider the following next steps:

- Strategically center Black, Brown, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and POC voices and experiences within your personal and professional community. This can occur within the current meeting structure, the texts and readings that are used as touchstone texts, and by including and affirming BIPOC members of your community.
- Utilize an Equity Team, a collective of diverse voices and perspectives, that come together to critically and thoroughly examine your teams, school’s, or community’s policies, practices, and beliefs. An equity team wonders what changes need to be made to center Black liberation within these structures and innovate interventions to align systems towards this goal.
- Lean into the discomfort of talking about racism and Anti-Blackness with curiosity as opposed to avoidance, academic doublespeak, and inauthenticity.
- Critically and thoroughly examine your community for anti-Black policies, practices, and beliefs. Through thoughtful examination, harmful structural practices, such as the over policing of Black people, standardized testing, and biased dress codes, can become more equitable and affirming to all people, but most importantly, the most vulnerable populations.
- Center the audacity to dream. Too often equity work centers on the damage and targeted harm which occurs to Black and Brown people, particularly children and young adults in a school community. However, if we were to envision a community without these barriers, where freedom was possible, what would that look and feel like? How can Black joy be systematically and strategically centered?

**A Place to Start:**

- Dr. Bettina Love’s Abolitionist Teaching Network, https://abolitionistteachingnetwork.org/
- Dr. Eddie Fergus’ Collaborative Equity Solutions, https://collabequitysolutions.org/
Appendix

Table 1. Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current high school teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current district leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Former district leader Current community-based organization liaison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Afro-Asian-Latinx</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>School leadership coach and staff developer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amaya</td>
<td>Afro-Latinx</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Former school leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Former teacher Current school leadership coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Current college student Alumna of district high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Current college student Alumna of district high school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


Gwendolyn Baxley (She/her) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at University at Buffalo, SUNY, who explores educational spaces in which Black youth and families survive, thrive and navigate and the role of race and AntiBlackness within these contexts. Gwen can be reached via email at gsbaxley@buffalo.edu.

Christian Kochon is an education practitioner and researcher and brings a critically conscious and anti-oppressive lens to his work, which has allowed him to parse the broader structural support systems of the education ecosystem. He can be reached via email at cjkochon@protonmail.com.

Ja’Dell Davis is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, whose research focuses on race-ethnicity in education, particularly the experiences of youth and practitioners in Out-of-School Time and Afterschool education, the transition from high school to post-secondary education, and race discourse in educational contexts. Ja’Dell can be reached via email at: jdavis26@wisc.edu.

Gloria Rosario Wallace, EdD, (She/Her/Ella) is an Afro-Dominicana educator-scholar-activist committed to supporting racially conscious, human-centered, school and organizational leadership. Gloria and be reached via email at: grosariowallace@gmail.com.

Jacqueline M. Forbes is a PhD candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who studies the experiences of Black students in predominantly Black schools. She can be reached via email at: forbes3@wisc.edu.

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Featured Artwork

Climate Change
By Junior Morel and Brandon Lee Vidal
Climate change is affecting our global society. It might seem like an issue that doesn’t affect students like us directly because it affects us in the long term. The goal is to graduate and be successful in life but how can we do this if our planet is in danger of being extinct?!

Our Beauty Within
By Korina Moncada
Us Women! Beautiful creatures bonded together ready to conquer the world. No matter our race, ethnicity or background we are equal.

“When God created man and woman, he was thinking, ‘Who shall I give the power to give birth to the next human being?’ And God chose woman. And this is the big evidence that women are powerful’. - Malala Yousafzai

By Nandita Ramkesar
To truly see myself in what I am taught, I appreciate both sides of my culture. An Indian outfit along with the Guyana flag is the perfect visual for who I am. Both inside and out.
The Color of Gender
By Leslie Martinez

This drawing shows that sometimes you face challenges of sexism and racism. It happens so often on a daily basis that it even happens in school.

Veterans
By Talya Reid

Veterans are always at risk of being homeless, despite the great lengths they went through to make sure we as are safe. I have Veterans in my family and this directly affects me.

If you are a student interested in submitting artwork for a future publication of VUE, please email us at nyumetro-vue@nyu.edu with “Student Art Submission” in the subject.
Honoring and Elevating Voices in Urban Education