Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (Part II):
Toward Agency, Abolition, and Freedom
Voices in Urban Education

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Voices in Urban Education (ISSN 1553-541X) is published semi-annually by the New York University Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools at the NYU 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 intersectional, interdisciplinary 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 the 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.

- **Conversations in Urban Education** consist of interviews (in-person transcripts or electronic correspondence) with thinkers, leaders, advocates, and students at the forefront of struggles for equity in schools. Interviews may contain footnotes but require few or no references, and should be vetted for factual accuracy by the interviewer prior to submission. Interviews may range between 3000 and 5000 words but word counts may be adjusted at the discretion of the editors. In addition to completed interviews, VUE accepts offers to be interviewed as potential submissions. Potential interviewees should indicate the topic(s) about which they would like to be interviewed, a summary of their relevant background or expertise on the topic(s), and how their interview might add to the body of knowledge around a specific conversation of interest in urban education.

- **Research Perspectives in Urban Education** consist of more traditionally academic research pieces, either studies conducted with an urban education focus or technical commentaries on existing research or strands of research. VUE has a preference for interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, intersectional, or partnership (researcher-practitioner, practitioner-student, practitioner-advocate, advocate-student, etc.) pieces that are inclusive of broader perspectives and experiences within urban education, but will also consider more traditionally academic pieces that add to the body of knowledge or to important topical conversations around equity, liberation, and justice in education. Action research studies with an equity focus conducted by teachers and/or students/parents will be considered. Research pieces should include an abstract, introduction, and up to 40 references (hyperlinked if possible), and may include up to six tables/figures.

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We thank students from NYC public schools whose art brings life to this issue of VUE.

NYU Metro Center was founded in 1978 at New York University. Its mission is to advance equity and excellence in education, connecting to legacies of justice work through critical inquiry and research, professional development and technical assistance, and community action and collaboration.
Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (Part II):
Toward Agency, Abolition, and Freedom

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Since 2021, 36 states have made efforts to restrict education on any and all race-related topics, from racism and Critical Race Theory to contributions made by particular racial or ethnic groups (Stout & Wilburn, 2022, February 1). In 16 of those states, race-related education has been banned altogether. These include Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Educators, teacher educators, and education researchers around the country increasingly express well-founded fears that they will lose their livelihoods for daring to invoke such “inflammatory” language as social justice, equity, bias, white privilege, and meritocracy. With campaigns to ban books that tell the truth about U.S. history, ban words that tell the truth about who young people are, and ban ideas that would dare challenge the status quo, it sometimes feels like we are moving backwards. Yet there are many reasons for hope. In seven of the 36 states where bills to thwart efforts toward honest and accurate education have been filed or passed, lawmakers on the right side of history have countered the opposition with initiatives that center truth-telling and fostering educational environments where all students can thrive. An additional 10 states that have been (thus far) spared from assaults by conservative lawmakers have enacted or expanded laws and policies that secure students’ access to culturally responsive and sustaining education. Furthermore, in April 2022, the Schott Foundation issued a press release announcing a multi-partner initiative with the NYU Metro Center, Race Forward, and a funders collaborative to provide grants and technical assistance to community groups fighting attacks on anti-racist education and winning reforms across the country.

This new issue of Voices in Urban Education (VUE) is also cause for optimism. Part two of a two-part series on Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE), it features the work of practitioners, activists, and scholars sharing valuable insights on what we at the NYU Metro Center define as “student-centered learning environments that affirm cultural identities; foster positive academic outcomes; develop students’ abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; empower students as agents of social change; and contribute to individual student engagement, learning, growth, and achievement through the cultivation of critical thinking.” The articles in this issue of VUE are organized into three sections: Commentaries on Urban Education, which consist of technical comments, opinions, and narratives of experience and/or guidance from leaders at the forefront of important conversations and issues in urban education; Conversations in Urban Education, which consist of interviews (in-person transcripts or electronic correspondence) with thinkers, leaders, advocates, and students at the forefront of struggles for equity in schools; and Research Perspectives in Urban Education, which consist of more traditionally academic research or theoretical pieces. I hope our readers will feel inspired and affirmed by the wisdom found in these pages.

Much hard work and dedication has gone into bringing this issue to life. In addition to our committed and thoughtful authors, I want to thank our managing editor, Yvonne Thevenot, members of the Editorial Board, the reviewers, the student contributors, our copyeditor Dody Riggs, Picante for their graphic design and production work, Chris Nichols (Senior Web Designer and Web Team Lead, NYU Steinhardt School) for ensuring the issue meets accessibility standards, and the members of the NYU Metro Center team who spent countless hours communicating with authors, proofreading, selecting student artwork, formatting, and polishing: Paloma Garcia (Chief of Staff), Pharoah Cranston (Director of Communications), and Destiny Wilson (Intern).

I also want to take this opportunity to announce our search for a lead editorial team, including an Editor-in-Chief and one or two Deputy Editor(s). The appointments will be for a period of five years with the possibility of subsequent renewals. It is anticipated that the incoming lead editorial team will begin assuming their responsibilities in January 2023.

The Editor-in-Chief is responsible for coordinating the timely publication of the journal. To accomplish this, the editor will work closely with the Deputy Editor(s) and the Editorial Board, which
consists of doctoral students. The lead editorial team is responsible for coordinating meetings of the Editorial Board, soliciting manuscripts, overseeing the student artwork competition, overseeing the review process, and coordinating journal production. The Deputy Editor(s) work closely with the Editor-in-Chief and the Editorial Board, providing support around coordinating meetings of the Editorial Board and soliciting manuscripts, leading the selection process for the student artwork competition, coordinating the review process, assisting with journal production, and stepping in to lead as needed.

Criteria for the VUE Editor-in-Chief are as follows: (1) education scholar at a two- or four-year institution of higher education; (2) prior experience writing for practitioner, policy, community, and/or youth audiences; (3) prior experience publishing and producing a journal, book, newsletter or other professional publication; (4) assurance of some university support such as clerical assistance, travel support, office space, and release time adequate to cover editorial responsibilities; (5) prior experience managing and supporting teams; and (6) capacity for managing the online publication system.

Criteria for the VUE Deputy Editor(s) are as follows: (1) education scholar at a two- or four-year institution of higher education; (2) prior experience writing for practitioner, policy, community, and/or youth audiences; (3) prior experience managing and supporting teams; and (4) capacity for co-managing the online publication system.

The Editor-in-Chief application should consist of a concise statement as to the individual’s interest in and vision for the journal, a current curriculum vitae, two copies of publications (at least one of which should be a publication for lay audiences), a statement regarding their experience managing and supporting teams, a statement regarding their university’s willingness to support the individual’s editorship, and contact information for three references.

The Deputy Editor application should consist of a concise statement as to the individual’s interest in the journal, a current curriculum vitae, two copies of publications (at least one of which should be a publication for lay audiences), a statement regarding their experience managing and supporting teams, and contact information for three references.

Please note that candidates are welcome to submit applications jointly as a proposed lead editorial team with clear identification of which team member seeks to be Editor-in-Chief and which team member(s) seek(s) to be Deputy Editor(s).

These materials and any other inquiries should be submitted via email to Fabienne Doucet, Executive Director of the NYU Metro Center and Chair of the Editorial Search and Selection Committee, at nyumetro-vue@nyu.edu. Applications will be reviewed beginning October 10, 2022, continuing until the positions have been filled. The VUE Editorial Search and Selection Committee will consist of Fabienne Doucet, Paloma Garcia, and Pharoah Cranston. Candidates will be selected for interviews with members of the Search and Selection Committee. The Chair of the Search and Selection Committee will contact the successful candidates.
Commentaries on Urban Education
The Voice of One to the Voices of Many: The Story of a Black Girl in STEM

Shihadah M. Saleem

Abstract

In this article, I take the reader along on my journey as a professional Black woman from Queens, New York, who chose a career in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and education. In this paper, I identify many parallels in the experiences of four students engaged in STEM, through the lens of culturally responsive and sustaining education. I then discuss how these four teenage girls’ individual experiences and thoughts converged, due to their participation in a STEM-based summer program. In this narrative, readers will discover how curiosity about STEM, along with sufficient education, determination, and support, can impact the lives of girls, their families, and communities. It also shines a light on the polarization experienced by Black girls and women in education. In the paper, I also reflect on and advise how girls and young professionals can utilize tools and influential people to embrace cultural differences, establish multiple measures of success, and focus on individual ability in order to sustain the stamina and rigor needed to pursue a career in STEM and education.

Keywords: Black and Brown girls, STEM, mentorship

Introduction

The journey of a Black or Brown girl in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) is a significant experience, but a story not often told or widely shared. Through storytelling and authentic conversations, we can find support, commonalities, and the energy to extend our early curiosity to achieve a meaningful career in STEM. At the time of writing this article, I was the senior manager of Youth Leadership and Alumni Programs at the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. In this paper, I explore three components of the culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) approach to education as they relate to my own journey, and to the experiences of four alumni of Greater Opportunities Advancing Leadership and Science (GOALS) for Girls, a STEM-based summer program that I co-founded at the museum. As outlined by the New York City (NYC) Department of Education (2021) and the New York State Department of Education, the three components of CR-S are (a) to build strong connections with students and strive to understand their lives, backgrounds, and identities (Howard, 2001); (b) to create emotionally safe spaces and foster trust among students, nurture their identities, and give them a sense of ownership and belonging (King & Pringle, 2019; Ong et al., 2018; Smith, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); and (c) to encourage students to interrogate and leverage their personal experiences, while learning from historically marginalized voices to challenge inequitable systems of power and privilege as agents of positive change (Basu & Barton, 2007; Young et al., 2019).

Through separate conversations with Goongoon, Treazure, Madison, and Amrita, four alumni of different summer cohorts of the GOALS for Girls Summer Intensive (GGSI) program conducted virtually in 2020, I align my experience with theirs and identify shared patterns. GOALS for Girls, now in its 13th year, is currently supported by the Motorola Solutions Foundation, ConEdison, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs. The program’s mission is to promote awareness of STEM opportunities for middle and high school girls in NYC and nurture their leadership and social skills, offer paid school-year-long internship-mentorship opportunities for program alumni, and host free, inclusive youth and family events throughout the year in STEM and youth development with cultural institutions and industry leaders.
At the time I conducted the interviews in 2020, the four alumni ranged in age from 14 to 22; they included high school students and a recent college graduate. Each was on a journey toward achieving various milestones and levels of success in high school, college, and career. Madison was a 14-year-old ninth grader attending Brooklyn High School of the Arts and a recent graduate of the first-ever virtual GGSI, which was held in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions. Treazure was a 17-year-old 12th grader at Midwood High School at Brooklyn College and was part of the 2018 summer cohort. Goongoon was also a 17-year-old 12th grader and part of the 2018 summer cohort; she attended Bronx Science High School. Amrita was a 22-year-old graduate of Boston University who was part of the 2012 summer cohort; at the time of writing, she was employed as a paralegal.

STEM: Role Model and Mentor

As is true of many Black and Brown girls, my name enabled my entry into different groups and cliques at school and determined whether I was an outcast or “one of us.” My name is hard; I struggled with it as a child. It was so alien, so different, so “Muslim.” My name is Shihadah Muslimah Saleem, and I am a young Black woman who is excited about marine science. Although not yet heralded as the luxury beachfront community it is today, Far Rockaway in Queens was my childhood playground.

My three siblings and I had many adventures along the shore, under the boardwalks, and in conquering the vast ocean swells. Sitting on the shell-encrusted shore, watching the horseshoe crabs as those ancient organisms slowly made their way out of the surf, I had so many questions. I wanted to know about the formation of waves, the specks of black in the sand, and the mysterious animals that dwelled just below the surface. “What are these things?” And even though my family
couldn't answer my questions, I found that PBS programs such as the NOVA series could. I was enamored with all that I learned about our planet on those programs—I was hooked! But, I didn't see myself in those TV episodes; I didn't see any Black or Brown female marine scientists, engineers, or biologists on the shows. I only saw Jacques Cousteau and other white men showcasing their work and the excitement of their various underwater discoveries.

Representation and authentic role models, coupled with intentional dialogue and mutual conversations between student and teacher, mentee and mentor, or young professional and seasoned professional can activate the practice of CR-S by both or all parties involved. Representation in STEM is key to encouraging the next generation of girls and young women to pursue and maintain a STEM career. Young et al. (2020) discuss the need for practical role models and STEM mentors from various and often interconnected fields of STEM (professional engineers, astrophysicists, engineers, chemists, marine scientists and more) who can speak with students about their STEM journey, offering authentic insights on college and career readiness.

Having compelling and diverse role models and mentors who share their STEM journeys can have a positive impact on the trajectories and STEM identities of Black and Brown girls (Kim et al., 2018). The first component of CR-S, building strong connections with students, when paired with intentional mentorship and out-of-school staff relationships, such as informal educators from cultural institutions or after-school programs, can enrich the dialogue in understanding backgrounds and identities for all involved. Intentional collaborative combinations of teachers, informal educators, practitioners, and mentors can provide a space where students can openly share their authentic selves, learn together, and reflect on their experiences with supportive adults. These opportunities may lead to more bonding and relationship-building (Yong et al., 2020) that can help sustain retention in higher education and a STEM career. Students, especially Black and Brown girls, must find commonalities, hear about individual journeys, and witness the celebration and support of women in STEM. During moments of recognition in the classrooms, at after-school clubs, in the media, and in their communities, female students can freely aspire to a career in STEM without fear of ridicule or bias. In recent years, steps have been taken to provide young women with more opportunities to achieve and sustain a STEM career: the creation of all-girls STEM programs, clubs, and mentorship events has moved the needle forward in the number of women majoring in and sustaining careers in various STEM fields. However, much more can be done to highlight the diversity of women in engineering, computer science, technology, and more. Although few studies have been conducted on how social media can be used to gain recognition for marginalized people of color in the STEM fields, it is important to note that, in the last two or three years, social media have provided a great platform for culturally diverse professionals, organizations, nonprofits, and higher education to showcase their talents and research.

What do Black and Brown girls see and experience today? Is it a shared generational experience of aspiring to academic greatness, only to see whiteness exalted? It remains the case that most traditional school systems solely perpetuate the celebration of white scientists, engineers, and mathematicians. Only during Black History Month do students briefly learn about the usual suspects of Black Americans’ contributions to STEM. When this pattern is repeated year after year, it stunts the recognition marginalized students need to be inspired by the achievements of Black and Brown people in the sciences (Korbey, 2018). In my conversation with 17-year-old Goongoon, she reflected on her need for such inspiration in order to develop the perseverance and resilience to pursue and maintain a career in the sciences:

“It's a lot about seeing your face when you look at the TV or read about an article. It's about having a background of confidence, in my opinion, that pushes you to actually pursue that career. We live in a day where, like my generation especially, we have some women to look up to. However, our inspiration could be a lot more diverse . . . It just comes down to having a lot of examples. So you feel motivated or represented enough to actually take that step to become like the people you look up to.

Teachers and educators are missing a great opportunity for students to discover and develop deeper connections with living role models and trailblazers in STEM. If applied through dynamic
curricula that support female Black and Brown students’ identities in STEM, the second and third components of the CR-S approach can help them develop a better sense of self-efficacy and societal involvement (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018; Woodson, 2015).

Treasure, also 17 years old, expressed to me that STEM is her passion. She applied to GGSI because it sounded like a great opportunity: “I had always wanted to go into a STEM field. I felt this opportunity was going to be the perfect bridge from going into middle school, [then] into high school . . . [and then] transitioning from a high school [STEM] career to an actual career.” Various studies demonstrate the importance of nurturing middle and high school students’ curiosity about STEM before they enter higher education. The act of nurturing their interests consistently from elementary to high school provides various opportunities for self-expression and exploration. It allows students to develop perseverance, rigor, and 21st-century “soft skills,” such as critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and innovation, and communication and collaboration (Larson & Miller, 2011). Informal learning environments and afterschool programs can help to bridge gaps between building and sustaining their curiosity and formal academic mastery in STEM skillsets. These non-school opportunities can offer students a respite from high-stakes academic pressure and negative adolescent group dynamics that can inhibit their success and achievement (Christensen et al., 2015; Xie & Reider, 2014).

A Safer-Braver Space for Growth

As the co-founder (2009-2022) of the GOALS for Girls program which includes summer and after-school programs and enrichment, I help guide students’ development of the whole self. The whole self is inclusive of one’s socio-emotional well-being and development, academic skill building and the active acquisition of knowledge, and the continued growth and utilization of 21st-century skills. Humans are such complex and diverse beings, with immense talents, experiences, and ideas. Each summer, through the intentional combination of academic studies and outdoor physical activities and workshops, the summer staff and museum educators create safer-braver spaces that enable a group of 50 female students and staff members to build a sense of trust and belonging and to thrive. I push these Black and Brown city girls out of their comfort zones and encourage them to participate in stereotypically “white people” activities, such as hiking, kayaking, rock climbing, sailing, and acting. I then compliment and reinforce these bonding and developmental experiences with academic STEM content. This combination of activities helps the girls understand the importance of fostering team-building, persistence, conflict-resolution, and communication skills with diverse people who also have varied skillsets and knowledge. The girls are developing a personal and professional network, a group of like-minded people to help support, inform, and balance their journey and attain career goals. These characteristics and connections are needed for STEM professionals to work together to develop and execute innovative solutions. We continually invite students to share their lived experiences and validate their uneasy feelings as they try kayaking for the first time (trying not to get their hair wet—girl, I know!) or read aloud from a scientific journal despite not being “good” readers. We also address their misconceptions about their ability to get into a “good” college or university.

The second component of CR-S, creating emotionally safe spaces and fostering trust among students, is paramount to student development. Along with pursuing restorative practices that promote positive relationships between students and educators (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2014), students, teachers, and informal educators can engage in fostering cultural awareness, caring, and respect. For example, Goongoon learned about GGSI through an alumna, who encouraged her to participate. Goongoon said, “I felt like I needed a space to fully explore the different possibilities that were out there, that [the program] might be a really good space for me to have that exploration.” All-girl STEM programs that integrate socio-emotional learning can provide participants with a safer-braver space to learn and explore without fear of judgment, exclusion, or the negative bias that impedes learning and trust (Baker, 2013; Kerr et al., 2012; Lane & Id-Deen, 2020). Giving female students time to explore and discover what they like and dislike about the various STEM careers expands their self-efficacy and power of choice. Informal learning environments also foster their development of a STEM identity and
can strengthen their belief in their personal and academic abilities, and explore the intersection of STEM and career pathways through inquiry-based activities, peer-to-peer conversations, and opportunities to speak with experts in the field (Marra & Bogue, 2006). Guided discussions encourage students to share and reflect on their personal experiences of stereotyping and other misconceptions in STEM. Misconceptions may include working in a boring lab all day, exclusion of creativity and/or the arts, and often working alone or writing research papers all day. The use and development of intentional and open conversations using growth mindsets and individual goal-setting strategies with students also refocus their attention on their own personal development and achievement.

Informal learning environments, such as after-school and summer programs, can pinpoint individual needs and give students the tools they need to become proponents of their own development. In a study called I AM STEM, King and Pringle (2019) dissect the informal STEM experiences of Black girls who were summer participants of the I AM STEM Camp in 2015, drawing from the girls’ reflective journaling and narrative inquiries (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Successful STEM programs, in contrast to those that are lackluster, boring, and confusing, focus on providing innovative tools and resources and fostering discussions of relevant and relatable STEM content, with the aim of nurturing student-centered learning and growth (Basu & Barton, 2007; King & Pringle, 2019). Informal and out-of-school programs that offer hands-on, inquiry-based activities and workshops, field trips, and discussions can provide Black and Brown girls with a much-needed environment in which they can thrive, pursue their interests, and readily understand the real-world application of a career in STEM. Having relatable role models and mentors can significantly affect the decisions girls make about pursuing studies or a career in STEM. During GGSI’s mentor mornings, female students have the opportunity to speak with ethnically, culturally, academically, and occupationally diverse women in the fields of aviation and space science, marine and earth science, and technology and engineering. From undergraduate to graduate students, formal to informal educators, and entry-level to expert professionals in the STEM fields, GOALS girls are able to hear about the STEM journeys of a wide spectrum of women. Creating a space for authentic conversation in the summer program gives the students the validity and connection they need to seriously consider a career in STEM.

Every Friday of GGSI offers a professional day of mentor mornings led by the summer staff. It provides GOALS girls with the opportunity to learn and practice their professional career readiness skills with each other and to participate in informal group conversations with invited women from the STEM fields noted above. The mentor mornings are especially important, as they offer the invited female mentors a chance to share their authentic experiences in the field or in the process of pursuing a STEM career. Through effective storytelling, visuals, and informal questions/answers, the mentors reflect on their first memorable experiences with science, technology, engineering, and math with either family, school, a program, or a role model. The students listen to the personal stories of women pilots, environmental scientists, astrophysicists, technologists, sound engineers, and more. We celebrate the journeys of these female mentors and the important roles they play in helping to shape the next generation of women in STEM.

During this process, 14-year-old Madison came to understand the importance of having influential and relatable female mentors. She remembers how a female mentor in aviation science spoke about the injustices in her workspace and broke everything down and how she overcame it. But that’s the one thing I definitely remember. She talked to us about how it made her feel: “I just felt like she really opened up and was vulnerable at that moment. Vulnerability is power. So just to see how young we [summer students] are and how comfortable she felt expressing herself and what she went through in her work department felt really special and felt close.”

Providing mentors who share their lived experiences emphasizes the third approach in CR-S. Having opportunities to speak with mentors and role models in STEM occupations gives prospective STEM students unique and thoughtful perspectives on the realities of attaining a career in the sciences. Mentorship provides a collective conversation and a foundation of support for developing and managing a professional career (Stroeger et al., 2017). Having diverse and effective female mentors helps girls define, navigate, and develop important skills in leadership.
roles that will lead them toward a career in the STEM fields. The mutual mentor-mentee relationship allows for deeper dialogue and practice in analyzing strengths and weaknesses, setting personal and professional goals, and building confidence, self-esteem, and skills. The recognition and scaffolding of these leadership skills are transferable in maintaining academic and professional rigor, expressing confidence in STEM research findings and participating in professional meetings, and readily employing collaborative approaches to finding innovative solutions to a problem or need.

Goongoon explained how she came to realize, through her own experiences, that she can be a mentor to future generations of girls interested in STEM: “In the future, I myself want to be that much more for the future generation of Bengali [girls to be] scientists or engineers, female engineers.” “Paying it forward” offers Black and Brown girls with a passion for STEM an opportunity to encourage younger students and to create peer-to-peer connections that broaden access to and understanding of the field. There is a growing movement of Black and Brown women in STEM careers who are yearning and willing to give back to their community. As they reflect on and sometimes still cope with harsh and toxic personal and professional environments characterized by bias, racism, and discrimination, their grit and perseverance enable them to welcome and cultivate new and fresh talents, which are so greatly needed in the U.S. STEM sectors (Archer et al., 2013).

From Research to Education

In 2007, after completing my master's degree in marine geomorphology at the University of South Florida College of Marine Science, I moved back to New York City. NYC, where skyscrapers, trains, buses, and people (so many people) swarm the streets and eclipse the limited green spaces, was a far cry from the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, where spotting dolphins, stingrays, sea stars, and seagrasses was a normal occurrence. I went from collecting data on marine research cruises to a job as a museum educator at the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum, which was housed aboard an aircraft carrier. But, the two environments weren’t as different as you might think. Even in a community as diverse as NYC, I was one of the very few Black educators in the department. By applying the research and communication skills I developed as a graduate student to learn about the Intrepid, I soon became a well-rounded museum educator who comfortably presented the history of the ship and its technological feats to thousands of students and teachers.

In 2008, a great opportunity came my way—a grant from the Motorola Solutions Foundation. The grant enabled me to stretch and challenge my skillsets in STEM and education and to form partnerships with nationally acclaimed all-girl schools in NYC. As I entered the classrooms of these eighth-grade students, I took a deep breath and smiled. I had an Intrepid-centric STEM lesson loaded on my laptop and my wheelie cart was stuffed with worksheets, models, and artifacts. I needed to show the students, who were predominantly Black and Brown girls, that I was capable, knowledgeable, and an ally who would help them to do and be their very best.

Once a safer-braver space had been created, it was critical for me to nurture the girls and to offer them a sense of ownership and recognition of their prior STEM knowledge and celebration of new STEM content. The sense of belonging within a facilitated program and in supportive groups that intentionally honor their diversity supports program impact and retention. The GOALS curriculum allows for the collective evolution of the students’ educational and social journeys within the program, thereby strengthening their connections to the STEM content, program staff, invited guests, and each other (Richards et al., 2004). Therefore, I welcomed their colloquialisms, their freedom of expression, their curiosity and misconceptions, and even their resistance to an academic or social challenge, but above all, I welcomed the comfort they showed in their behavior toward me. I invited them to bring their culture into every lesson and, importantly, I didn’t sugar coat, “dumb down,” or evade the histories of racism and sexism so tightly intertwined with STEM.

In the classes, we co-created a community of learning that highlighted the girls’ involvement in the process. During my workshops, there was no apprehension about a test or quiz, so the pace
and ease of exploration and development were satisfying for both the students and the teachers. The practices of community-building and student-centered learning are among the many ways of creating a sustainable and cohesive environment where all students can grow, build confidence, and gain acceptance. Therefore, one of my primary objectives for the first summer STEM program was to have girls define their own measures of success and achievement, which I did using open-ended questions, trial and error, and by providing a safer-braver space in which the girls could fail—and then try again.

Through the lens of measuring the value of success and power combined with the systemic erasure of the historic achievements of marginalized people, the third component of CR-S also supports a student's perception of the “whiteness” of success and a fear of failure. This often inhibits their ability to engage with and expand their interests and skillsets. This occurs to such an extent that students begin to question their own perceptions of their culturally ridiculed “Blackness” and “Brownness.” Having been historically and commonly stereotyped as lazy, unmotivated, stupid, cognitively incapable, or lacking academic stamina/perseverance (Welch & Sigelman, 2011) often stifles Black and Brown girls' ability to try new things and to embrace the process regardless of the desired outcomes.

The measure and attainment of success are important to a person's academic and professional journeys, especially for Black and Brown girls. Amrita, who is 22 years old, explained how she defines her own measure of success as she navigates within society: “Success means being comfortable with your situation, being at peace with your past and the mistakes you've made, and being hopeful about the future.” González-Pérez et al. (González-Pérez, De Cabo, & Sáinz, 2020) emphasize Eccles' expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 2005; Eccles et al., 1983), which suggests that, if students perceive and/or expect success and give it high value, they will be more likely to take a particular course of action. This involves, for example, taking challenging academic courses, applying for and completing a rigorous internship, and sacrificing leisurely activities for more education or professional development when pursuing a chosen career or role. Therefore, as Amrita becomes more comfortable with her knowledge and workforce skills, she will be able to cope more easily with her mistakes or failures. She will no longer see a mistake as a permanent roadblock to her success or a reflection of her ability, and she will not let it interfere with her goals. Enabling Black and Brown girls to redefine success and failure helps to broaden their lens on their cultural identity and self-evaluation, thereby lessening the need to uphold the societal superiority of “white” success (Kruger & Aviv, 2012). Educators who employ the third CR-S component with intentionality, thoughtful planning, authentic reflection, and actionable outcomes will enable girls to think critically about and confidently address their development and abilities, which are too often confined by systemic oppression through power and privilege. Once recognized and addressed, students can more readily become agents of change for themselves and their communities.

Black and Brown girls everywhere are capable, interested, and excited about STEM. They excel in traditional classroom settings and often surpass academic expectations, but too often their need for additional support falls short. Madison, the youngest of the girls I interviewed, described the importance of Black and Brown women being represented in STEM careers and the need for programs like GOALS for Girls, which couples socio-emotional development with learning STEM content to provide a holistic experience. Young et al. (2019), for example, explain the need for culturally relevant out-of-school opportunities that support girls' engagement with real-world opportunities (such as internships, increasing awareness of STEM relevance that matters directly to them or the community, or participation in clubs, design challenges, and events), connections with the community, and parental and peer involvement. Maintaining strong connections within communities and with families, addressing the challenges and obstacles of pursuing an interest in STEM, and being encouraged to master STEM subjects all provide Black and Brown girls with a wealth of support and choice.
The Voices Carry On

I am the product of my household, community, education, and occupation. I understand and embrace the full extent of my identity, both personal and cultural, and the fact that it can shift and expand over time through my experiences (Sue, 2001). Over many years of self-reflection, observation, research, conversations, and presentations, I have brought my whole self to the table and have pushed the narrative of Black and Brown people in everything I do. If I may borrow words from Treazure, “My mindset is, if there isn’t already someone doing it, I might as well be the first one.” Formal and informal education that responds to the cultural and societal pressures Black and Brown students endure can help increase their persistence and confidence as they continue on their STEM journey (Morton, 2020).

I continue on this journey with and for girls who are interested in science, technology, engineering, and math. I share my story of a shy child with big curiosity and the determination to follow through with my love of geology and marine science. I share the thoughts of Amrita, Treazure, Goongoon, and Madison because this kind of validation of Black and Brown girls needs to be at the forefront of how cultural institutions, higher education, and STEM companies can increase and sustain trust, value cultural diversity, celebrate and promote success, and support academic and occupational growth. If we do not share such conversations with Black and Brown girls, and our own journeys, the utilization and effectiveness of the CR-S approach will fall short.

The CR-S approach helps to sustain a cultural shift in recognizing and addressing the bias and systematic barriers that inhibit the academic success and development of Black and Brown girls. Informed by my lived experiences and the programming I have provided for Black and Brown girls interested in STEM careers, I call for increased and more robust opportunities for these girls to excel that will energize their interest in and passion for science, technology, engineering, and math.

References


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Commentaries on Urban Education

Making Up for Lost Time:
The Power of Engaging Students in Co-Created Social Justice Projects

Abstract

In this commentary on urban education, I argue that the expanded and accelerated student learning recovery programs designed to make up for racial disparities in pandemic-related learning loss create an important opportunity for educators and students to co-create engaging programs that practice a culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy. Drawing from 40 years of experience working in New York City with over-age and under-credited students, multilingual immigrant and refugee students, and middle school students living in temporary housing, I propose a pedagogical approach that teaches to students' strengths and connects their learning to their lives, rather than enmeshing them in remedial instruction to try to make up for lost time. I use three student social justice documentary projects to illustrate the kind of student-centered teaching strategies, education theories, and transformative experiences students can have in post-pandemic afterschool, weekend, and summer programs. This approach is driven by a culturally responsive and sustaining education curriculum that (1) connects students' learning to their lives, challenges them to critically research the inequities they face in their schools and communities, and enables them to formulate actions to address them; (2) fosters a caring, inclusive learning environment with close student-teacher relationships that attend to students' social-emotional needs and tap into the wealth of their family and community resources; and (3) facilitates rigorous project-based learning, wherein students collaboratively create new knowledge and make their stories, music, and voices heard by their community.

Keywords: culturally responsive and sustaining education, strengths-based teaching, cultural wealth, youth participatory action research, project-based learning

Introduction

Researchers report that students of color are falling as much as a full school year behind their white peers in more affluent schools, due to the unprecedented disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the pre-existing racial equity gaps (Dorn et al., 2021a, 2021b). Strategies to mitigate students' accumulated learning loss of the last two years include expanded and accelerated learning during and after school, on weekends, and over the summer. These recovery strategies offer intensive tutoring, test prep, and remediation (Barnum, 2021; Dorn et al., 2021a, 2021b; UNESCO, 2020). However, giving students more of what didn't work before the pandemic but with greater intensity is the wrong response, and it will do little to address the social and emotional trauma they have experienced or to remedy disparities in the race and class achievement gap.

Educators should instead seize this extraordinary opportunity by partnering with their students to co-create highly engaging afterschool and weekend enrichment programs that practice a culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) pedagogy that teaches to students' strengths and connects their learning to their lives, rather than enmeshing them in remedial work to try to make up for lost time. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2017) stresses the importance of linking learning “to the challenges the students are confronting . . . racial profiling, mass incarceration, or inequality in suspension [that] may be impacting students directly . . . Failure to engage them is exactly why students do not trust schools to be places that deal honestly and forthrightly with the issues of their lives” (p. 146). As called for by the Black Education Research Collective (2021), this approach builds trust between schools and Black families and their communities, and prepares students for civic life by teaching the truth about the world around them. Far from being remedial, engaging students in collaborative community inquiry develops their critical literacy and social-emotional skills while also leveraging
their family, community, and individual assets. As Geneva Gay (2010) describes it, this pedagogy uses “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students” (p. 31).

Using a structural racial justice lens of decolonization, this approach applies a social, political, and historical analysis of our nation as a settler-colonial capitalist state, whose wealth was built through the theft of land and genocidal wars against indigenous peoples, and the enforced labor and brutal mass enslavement of Africans. It sees the longstanding racial inequities in our schools as a part of the larger problem of systemic racism that also pervades our criminal justice, health care, housing, legal, and electoral systems. From a student-centered perspective, decolonizing our schools and society at large is not simply a metaphor but a process, whereby critical understanding of this history is linked to an analysis of the contemporary conditions of students who are migrants and refugees from Indigenous communities in formerly colonized lands, such as Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and beyond, and whose families are too often exploited, criminalized, and deported. This approach also explores the radical history of those who resisted, organized, marched, and spoke out for freedom and justice and those who continue to do so today.

I argue now for the more widespread practice of this student-centered critical pedagogical framework because I have seen it working in classroom and afterschool settings over the past four decades. This is a highly effective approach to engaging over-age and under-credited students who
attend alternative and transfer schools in New York City, multilingual immigrant and refugee students in the international high schools, and middle school students who live in temporary housing. As the founding director of the Educational Video Center, a New York City-based nonprofit, I draw from my experience co-creating social justice projects with teachers and students (Goodman, 2018) to consider what our most disengaged learners will need in order to be drawn back into education. This pedagogy is informed by the history of activist educators who engaged their students in participatory action research and taught literacy for freedom, which is more relevant than ever with today’s Jim Crow-like voter suppression. These activists include Septima Clark's citizenship schools in South Carolina, the SNCC freedom schools in Mississippi, Paulo Freire’s adult literacy culture circles in Brazil, and Grace Lee Boggs’ Detroit Summer, a multiracial, intergenerational collective that develops youth leadership.

Student projects can take a range of forms, but because my work has been media based, I will discuss the implications for teaching and learning of three social justice documentary projects that I co-facilitated with New York City students, teachers, and social workers prior to the pandemic. Through these projects, which were conducted in classroom, afterschool, and weekend workshop settings, the students investigated and proposed actions to address police abuse and gentrification in Harlem, policing and immigrant rights in Washington Heights, and the rights of students living in temporary housing in the Bronx.

These three cases illustrate the kind of student-centered teaching strategies, participatory education theories, and transformative experiences students can experience in summer and weekend programs that are driven by a co-created, CR-S education curricula that (1) connects student learning to their lives and challenges them to critically research the inequities they face in their schools and communities, and to formulate the actions needed to address them; (2) fosters a caring, inclusive learning environment with close student-teacher relationships that attend to students’ social-emotional needs and tap into their wealth of family and community resources; and (3) facilitates rigorous project-based learning, wherein students collaboratively create new knowledge and make their stories, music, and voices heard by their community (Akom et al., 2008; Mirra et al., 2013; Paris & Alim, 2017). Extra care will be needed to support students’ social-emotional well-being, as many are struggling with Covid-related grief, depression, and trauma.

Co-Created Projects

For the three projects, teachers partnered with students to co-create an inquiry-based documentary curriculum in phases. The students chose the main social justice issues they wanted to investigate. They brainstormed about social problems experienced in their everyday lives that they wanted to raise awareness about and change. Over the course of the project, the students decided (1) the student, family, and community sources they would survey or interview; (2) the argument they would make; (3) the story they would tell; (4) the music, spoken word, and art they would create to tell it; and (5) the actions they would advocate for to address the problem. These experiences gave students a great sense of agency and ownership over their learning, as well as practice in democratic decision-making.

Teachers facilitated the activities that helped students build the critical and technical skills they needed to conduct the community research, media production, interviewing, editing, and reflection/action phases of the process. Practitioners taught according to students’ strengths and looked for ways to leverage their interests and abilities, such as inviting students who like to rap to compose a piece for the project, those who like to draw to create animation, or an English as a New Language (ENL) student to conduct or translate interviews in their home language. Contributing to the project in these ways reinforced students’ feelings of being needed by the group. Throughout the process, the teacher was learning from the art, knowledge, and experiences her students, their families, and the community was sharing.

When conducting their research, the students first turned to each other as sources of knowledge and experience on the social problem they were addressing. This approach draws in part from the tradition of youth participatory action research (YPAR), which has roots in mid-20th-century
African, Asian, and Latin American anti-colonial and liberation theology, which inspired struggles and maintains that problems of injustice can best be solved by those who directly experience them. YPAR also draws from critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), which highlights the validity of personal experiential knowledge. The roots of this theory go back to slave narratives and Native American storytelling that seek to preserve their culture in history and myth, and in stories told from marginalized people's points of view that challenge the dominant narratives. As active researchers, these young people provided their own unique insights and insider perspectives through a range of techniques, including surveys, focus groups, oral histories, and interviews (Petrone et al., 2021).

ENL high school students participating in a ten-week YPAR project in Manhattan's predominantly Dominican community of Washington Heights interviewed each other and people on the streets to gather stories of how racially discriminatory police practices affect this immigrant community. While filming these street conversations, meetings with immigrant rights lawyers, and protests, they discovered connections between “broken windows” arrests of immigrants for misdemeanors, such as turnstile jumping and selling churros in the subway, and their subsequent deportation. They then used this information when they questioned local NYPD officers about it, on camera. Even though the students had to fight their nervousness when talking to strangers on the streets or to lawyers and police officers, they understood that these issues are urgent and relevant, since their school and community had a high number of unauthorized immigrant families. In the eight-week Saturday workshop called Know Your Rights, middle and high school students from the Bronx interviewed fellow students, school social workers, and community and family members for their project on homelessness. They bore witness to the conditions of housing insecurity, as some of them are among the more than one in ten New York City students living in shelters or doubled up in apartments shared with friends or relatives.

In their peer interviews, students explained that they sometimes fall asleep in class because they have to wake up at 5 am for the more than two-hour bus ride they take each way between their shelter and the school. They described the lack of wi-fi access in the shelter, which they needed to do homework. One student reported that her family was evicted when her mother withheld rent because the landlord refused to fix the hazardous conditions in their apartment. A parent spoke of the lack of privacy in the shelter for herself and her children. Had the students known then about the recently uncovered fraud and sexual abuse scandals involving operators of the shelters where they were living, their anger and sense of betrayal by the adults running the shelters would surely have been even greater.

Community Trauma and Cultural Wealth

After students conducted interviews, the teachers facilitated viewing sessions that helped students make sense of their research and connect their learning to their lives. Discussing the issues raised in their interviews sometimes made students feel angry, overwhelmed, and hopeless that anything will change. Bringing community advocacy organizers, college professors, parents, and school social workers to speak to the student groups helped them break down complex concepts like gentrification, “broken windows” policing, and the school-to-prison pipeline, and to understand the sociopolitical context of their personal experiences. These community partners provided positive role models who were teaching and organizing in the community and showing students that change is possible.

Developing students' resilience and encouraging their continued engagement in the project required spaces where they felt safe, respected, and listened to. For example, even though the students living in temporary housing showed great strength and resilience and were not responsible for being homeless, some felt shame because of their situation. This required the adult facilitators to have a sense of cultural humility and to self-reflect on their position of privilege, particularly white educators.

One strategy that each group used was to create a group agreement, which they kept posted on the wall, to establish norms and ground rules for doing well-functioning work and for having conversations. Every session of the Saturday workshop began with a short team-building game that
allowed students to laugh and have fun getting to know each other better. Students also participated in activities such as “highs and lows,” which gave them and the adults a dedicated time to share high or low points from their week. These activities enabled the facilitators and students to build closer relationships and to express empathy, which lifted some of the emotional burdens everyone carried with them into the room.

Many students were struggling with mental health problems. Informed by the research on adverse childhood experiences, the group practiced mindfulness and other trauma-sensitive strategies, and social workers counseled students individually as needed. Research on adverse community experiences, trauma, and resilience (Pinderhughes et al., 2015) broadened the focus on trauma from individualized household violence and abuse to the lasting damage done to communities by the structural violence behind the everyday violence, such as widespread job loss, poverty-level wages, and oppressive policing, and to address the collective organizing needed for community resilience and well-being.

This approach holds two truths at the same time. Many students come from exploited and oppressed communities that have been historically marginalized, yet they also come from families and communities with rich cultures, knowledge, and networks that students bring with them to school. A CR-S pedagogy fosters student healing and resilience, as well as strength-based practices.

Critiquing Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, Tarra Yosso (2005) proposes other areas for educators to leverage in order to better understand the empowering potential of communities of color. This includes aspirational capital, or “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers”; linguistic capital, the multiple language and social communication skills of these communities and their engagement in traditions of storytelling, oral histories, parables, and proverbs; and familial capital, which is the “cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin)” (pp. 78-79) that carry a sense of community memory and commitment to well-being.

When teachers provide spaces where students can access this diverse capital, they are creating more inclusive and humanizing learning environments. As students working on their projects were investigating their chosen subjects, they and their teachers learned to value and learn from other students, teachers, college professors, community leaders, and family members. The community became a laboratory for learning, as their interviews took place in class, at local colleges and nonprofits, in civic offices, on the street corner (as in Figure 1; Goodman, 2019), and sometimes in each other’s homes.
In the project on student homelessness, one student interviewed her mother and sister at their shelter about the problems of living there. This interview showed the 7th-grade student’s linguistic capital, as she translated from Spanish to English and back during the interview with her mother. She even translated the Spanish, saying, “Even the cats have keys to come in!” which her mother used to describe their utter lack of privacy and security in the shelter. She also showed her familial capital when she explained how she helps her younger siblings with their homework each night. She and her younger sister showed aspirational capital when, in the face of great adversity, they expressed their hope of becoming a doctor and a teacher, respectively. Notably, she displayed great courage in telling her family’s story in the hope that it could improve the future well-being of her peers and other families. Finally, the hugs, smiles, and jokes shared by the children and their mother during the interview and while eating together afterward showed the love and affection they have for each other.

**Creating and Distributing Knowledge**

Giving an overview of the documentary-making process, teachers worked with students to fill in key milestones in their production calendar. Planning backwards from the date of their school/community screening of the final video, teachers created multiple entry points for students to encounter and learn to solve open-ended problems (including technical, artistic, literacy, and social-emotional) from start to finish. To facilitate this kind of project-based learning effectively, practitioners needed to use modeling, scaffolding, coaching, and peer-teaching strategies. They often started by modeling an activity with students, such as conducting an interview, then stepped back to allow students to practice and solve problems on their own or in small groups. Teachers used “wall talk” and other reflection activities to help students self-assess their growth over the course of the project. Wall talk, whereby students give themselves advice on where to make improvements and make visible the sense of confidence they are developing in learning to ask authentic questions and make their voices heard (Goodman, 2019), is shown in Figure 2.

Teachers increased student engagement by explaining the purpose of the skill or information students were learning and why it mattered. When a teacher scaffolded reading skills with a jigsaw or annotation activity, for example, students were more likely to be engaged if they understood that they would need that information to conduct an upcoming interview or for a narration they would write. The students’ learning was given purpose and reinforced throughout the process.
Developing students’ social-emotional well-being and self-confidence as learners was built into the technical aspects of the workshop. As soon as a student learned a skill, such as how to operate the camera or tablet or use a function in the editing software, they taught a peer what they learned. Encouraging such informal peer teaching decentered the teacher and distributed knowledge and responsibility for teaching to all students. Reinforcing their skills and building their confidence and pleasure in learning through these small but visible successes was especially important for students who didn't have a strong identity as successful students.

Students came to understand that mistakes, such as a shaky camera or a mumbled question, were a natural part of the project-based learning process, one that required them to step outside their comfort zone with each new task. Learning from their mistakes and supporting each other in their next effort helped students build a sense of resilience. Knowing that each task they performed contributed to the successful completion of the documentary and to the overall success of the group, they also developed a sense of mutual accountability.

When teachers developed local partnerships that enabled them to tap into the cultural wealth and diverse funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) in their community, they expanded the networks of resources and social capital available to the students and their families. The ENL students working on the policing and immigrant rights project expressed feelings of pride and self-affirmation after they interviewed community immigrant rights lawyers, who could provide them with critical assistance if any of their own family members ever faced deportation. When they interviewed the director of the school office for students living in temporary housing, the students learned about the educational rights they and their families were entitled to under the McKinney-Vento Act, and how to self-advocate.

Students’ social capital and sense of civic engagement can be strengthened through this kind of process. As part of their project investigating police abuse and gentrification, for example, transfer high school students traveled to the office of the New York City Brooklyn borough president, who is now the mayor of New York City, to interview him there. One student explained that this experience inspired him to study politics. He was moved by the borough president’s story about growing up as a Black male in New York, including being beaten by NYPD officers and then working for police accountability as a political leader.

The students producing this documentary developed pride in local Black history when a historian who was a project co-facilitator taught them about the recently uncovered history of Seneca Village (Copeland et al., n.d.), a thriving 19th-century community of predominantly middle-class African Americans that was located near their Upper West Side Manhattan school. In their video, they retold the story of how all the residents were forced to leave Seneca Village when it was razed and its identity erased by the creation of Central Park. The students also researched the history of the Trail of Tears, the dark tale of when the U.S. government drove Native Americans from their homes, which caused thousands to die of hunger and disease along their 5,000-mile trek westward. They connected these historical examples of the forced removal of people of color to Harlem residents’ contemporary stories of stop-and-frisk police harassment and of being displaced from their homes by the spread of gentrification.

Moving from Research to Action

Presenting their project to school and community audiences for public dialogue and action is the last phase of a YPAR project, whether the action is writing a policy paper, making a conference presentation, or creating a work of art, music, drama, photography, video, or spoken word. To arrive at this point, students in the three documentary projects had to review their research and interview footage and then come to a consensus about the best order for presenting their findings to their audiences in order to tell a story, make their argument, and propose an action. This involved noting the main themes and questions they addressed and the order in which they wanted them to appear. For example, students working on policing and gentrification displayed the main themes across the classroom wall and divided their project into sections: gentrification general, gentrification and policing, gentrification and historical context, and solutions. They placed Post-It notes under the...
sections with the quotes from their footage that they liked best. They added music, still images, charts, and narration to their research to make it a compelling and artful story. They presented their final project at a school-wide meeting, which led to a powerful dialogue among students, teachers, school leaders, police officers, and city council members. The students concluded their video on police and immigrant rights with a narration in English and Spanish that taught the community audience about their legal rights, should immigration agents knock on their door.

They presented their documentary to their peers at school, to teachers at a professional development conference, at Know Your Rights community workshops, and to the general public on community access television. The team working on the temporary housing project concluded their film with a call to action, which requested that shelters be located closer to their schools, that students with long bus rides be allowed to start school later, and that shelters provide library and recreational facilities. They asked that social workers and teachers be better informed about their rights to an equitable education under the McKinney-Vento Act, and for teachers to get to know their students better and be understanding of the injustices they experience. While they proposed actions to improve the conditions of youth homelessness, the students also insisted that they were not defined by those conditions. They reframed how they were represented by filming each other having fun and showing off their various interests and creative talents, including step dancing, drawing, performing a student’s rap commentary on Black history, and more.

When the students presented their homelessness video at a Columbia University School of Social Work Conference, it moved school social workers and teachers in the audience to renew efforts to destigmatize the problem of student homelessness and reverse the compassion deficit in schools. The social workers and district leaders present eagerly asked to show the students’ film in their schools and thus spread their voices.

My hope is that these sketches of transformative student learning and action from before the pandemic will open new possibilities for practitioners and students working together in culturally responsive, sustaining spaces, including extended day, weekend, or summer programs. Over the past two-plus years, our students have suffered devastating losses on many levels, including lost learning. As we make up for lost time and take up the work of re-engaging students in learning, rather than speeding up remediation, we should slow down and redouble our efforts to truly connect with our students through relevant and challenging enrichment programs. Educators must teach to and through their strengths to help them connect their learning to their lives, and to draw from their deep well of family, community, and cultural resources. In these difficult times, we need these students’ voices and stories, their fresh insights, their art and their knowledge to move us toward a more just and equitable world.

References


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Reflecting on Pedagogy:
Today’s Student Is Tomorrow’s Leader

Abstract

This article is intended as a deconstruction of my (the author’s) perspective as a career-changer from comedian and actor to teacher that will deepen teachers’ understanding of education beyond the classroom and after the school day. At the time of this article’s writing, in my third school year teaching with the New York City Department of Education, it is my opinion that it is growing more and more urgent that we, as educators, do all we can to help shape today’s students into responsible leaders to serve tomorrow’s communities. During the short period of time we have with our students, we can model the behaviors we wish to see in our communities—not just for us but for future generations.

Keywords: pedagogy, praxis, teacher identity, empathy, education as activism

Introduction

As a history teacher, I am drawn to this quote by James Madison, fourth president of the United States: “The advancement and diffusion of knowledge . . . is the only guardian of true liberty” (Madison, 1825). This quote inspires me to motivate my students to be well informed and prepared to succeed in the world. In so many ways, I aim to emulate President Madison by instilling in my students the notion that education in itself is a form of activism.

Knowledge gives us the wherewithal to address a problematic issue head on, rather than hoping that someone, someday will address it for us. Our knowledge informs everything we do as teachers and, if we apply it wisely, it will pay off in the future actions of our students. Understanding how I can best use teacher and student knowledge enables me to empower my students to embody the change they wish to see in the world. With President Madison’s quote in mind, I tell my students that, if they want to make a change in their communities, it is important not only that they vote but that they run for office.

As Bartlett (2005) wrote, “Educators must develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy. This includes, obviously, the language they bring to the classroom” (p. 346). As teachers, it is our responsibility to teach our students how to look at their communities from multiple perspectives and viewpoints. Once they learn how to assess and deconstruct a situation or challenge, they can determine how best to address or overcome it.

Bartlett (2005) also stated that “knowledge is not a piece of data, something immobilized, concluded, finished, something to be transferred by one who acquired it to one who still does not possess it” (p. 346). Too often society thinks of knowledge as a collection of facts and data. This is the very basis of “teaching to the test,” of measuring student achievement based on test scores. Knowledge is correctly viewed as information that enables us to function, achieve, and accomplish goals. Through coursework, professional experience, and connections with colleagues, today’s educators are armed with strategies and pedagogical techniques to react and respond to the ideals at the forefront of transforming education in service of our students.

In this paper, I identify three main points that I use to demonstrate the skills I developed and sharpened during my graduate school years. These skills, which are greatly beneficial to my pedagogy, have helped me to form my teacher identity, my curricular aims, and to grow my inquiry process. All have had a noteworthy impact on my progress toward mastery of knowledge and praxis.

In my Master’s coursework, I was tasked with identifying and informing my teacher identity since who I am, where I come from, and how I identify inherently affect how I relate to, interact with, and
support my students. Investigating who I am and how I carry myself enables me to understand how my teacher identity can negatively or positively affect my relationships with students. My current location in New York City often informs my teacher identity. I was surprised to learn, for example, that students can navigate the transit system by themselves or buy breakfast at a bodega on their way to school. These are experiences I never had growing up. These differences enable me to engage students in the concept of place and to emphasize how important it is for them to take advantage of all the benefits afforded them simply by living in the city.

It has been difficult for me to separate my identity from my upbringing in the South and the Southern perspective on current or historic events. It was due to a “cultural conflict” that I, a White male from the southern United States, ended up teaching in New York City. Without being aware of it, culturally responsive pedagogy greatly influenced my professional transition.

In my Master's coursework, I was introduced to the work of Lisa Delpit (2020), who stresses the need to address stereotypes in the classroom:

> We have to inundate the conscious mind with ideas to reprogram the unconscious mind. We have to give ourselves and our students new stories that uncover the brilliance they exhibited as babies . . . And we have to replace the stereotypes that caused their brains to shut down or have so traumatized them emotionally that they have nothing left for academics. (Delpit, as cited in Giegerich 2020, para. 2)

It is only by addressing stereotypes head on that we can quell them and mitigate their impact, both inside and outside the classroom. By demonstrating that stereotypes are not accurate depictions of those they demean, I can help offset the impact of such notions. Replacing the stereotypes that harangue and plague so many learners is why the educator's job is so vital to our society.

Gloria Ladson-Billings' tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy go a long way in fighting the battles our students face each school year. Offering culturally relevant pedagogy teaches students how to interpret and solve problems in an academic setting, emphasizes the importance of their culture and that of others, and gives them the skills they need to address significant issues that arise outside the classroom. Ladson-Billings has given educators in urban settings a blueprint for engaging and encouraging today's learners to be tomorrow's difference-makers.

I explored these concepts during my studies and while composing the K.E.E.P.S. Claim essay required to earn my Master's degree. The essay demonstrates how an educator will employ and improve five aspects of their pedagogy: Knowledge, Enquiry, Empathy, Pluralism, and Social Commitment. Knowledge refers to intellectual inquisitiveness in the context of our teaching; inquiry is the need for feedback and constructive criticism of our practice and our students' work; empathy emphasizes the importance of meeting the needs of each student and striving to serve them to the best of your ability. Pluralism is the idea of inclusiveness and a celebration of the differences that make every school community unique. Social commitment, the final component of my essay, highlights the importance of working toward a greater good and investing in the future of society by excelling as an educator.

By identifying and examining my inquiry process in one graduate school course, I came to realize that it is more than just the way I write my lessons or construct assessments. My inquiry process is a way to use the skills that best serve my pedagogy while also identifying and addressing areas I can develop further. For example, I can rely on my sharp relationship-building skills to serve a struggling student by asking for help from a teacher more skilled than I at analyzing student test scores and assessments.

I used my inquiry process to identify a previous student's (let's call him Randall) potential trouble areas for the new school year. He was still not asking for help, and his academic performance on the formative assessments backed up my suspicions. My process led me to work with the seventh-grade team to see if Randall's issue was confined to social studies or if it was occurring in other classrooms. When I heard similar stories from his English language arts, math, and other teachers, I
sprang into action to construct supports that I thought would serve his personality most effectively. For example, Randall does not want the attention that comes with asking for help in class, so I had him come to my classroom for additional support during his lunch period. When this proved effective, I decided to raise the stakes by inviting him to take part in the peer tutoring program, which replaces one recess period a week, during which students seek or offer academic support from or to classmates. I first invited Randall to get support from his classmates, and then suggested that he offer support to others. This strategy paid off, and Randall eventually found that he was learning by teaching his classmates who were struggling similarly.

Whereas I relied on my prior rapport with Randall and kept an eye out for a repeat of his struggles before using the data to alter his instruction, I feel that some educators might have relied more on the assessment data, on formal observation in other classrooms, or on a one-on-one interview with him. Relying on data or observations is an impersonal manner of helping a struggling student. While teaching Randall in the previous school year, I recognized that he performs better on an assessment if he can relax beforehand. As such, I would ask him to relax with a book or computer game in the recess the period before a quiz. However, this process did not appear on his report card, which illustrates that the importance of anecdotal evidence and personal rapport with a student cannot be computed.

Identifying students’ weak spots or areas for growth is the crux of teacher knowledge. The more I improve areas where I am lacking, the better my praxis becomes, which in turn better serves my students. I had a graduate school professor who helped me set and scrutinize my teaching goals by exploring my curricular aims. In this course, I sat with specific areas for improvement within my pedagogy and developed strategies for incorporating scaffolds, which would positively impact my teaching practices. My goals can directly impact my students’ goals, which will serve them throughout their academic careers and beyond. The way that people learn best is by participating actively in the coursework and materials. Hansen et al. (2017) wrote about educator Madeline Hunter, who developed the mastery teaching model, “to encourage students to attain stated outcomes or objectives deemed relevant for mastery” (p. 45).

Learning by doing in the classroom is essential to creating a memory that could last a lifetime. When my seventh-grade social studies students are learning about the atrocities that took place when Christopher Columbus enslaved the Taino indigenous people, they engage with the material by participating in a mock court case—more or less *The Tainos v. Columbus et al.* The assignment could easily have been to do a reading and then draft a short essay and take a quiz. However, the students will be more likely to remember the lesson because of the opportunity I created for them to actively engage with the material by acting it out.

Identifying students’ weak spots or areas for growth is the crux of teacher knowledge. Moreover, the more I improve the areas where I am lacking, the better my praxis becomes, which in turn is better for my students. This reminds me of a quote from Benjamin Franklin (1746): “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” By designing educational experiences rather than simply teaching to the test, we are actively creating the kind of experience that is the very purpose of education. As teachers, we want our students to leave the classroom with the tools they need to become informed citizens.

I became a teacher after the birth of my now four-year-old daughter. My goals for my students matter more than ever because they will affect the world in which my daughter will be living. Once she was born, I had real skin in the game and did not want to reach retirement age still just complaining about the country’s state of affairs. I wanted to know that I had played a part in shaping the generation of people my daughter will work with and work for, the people she will date and perhaps one day marry. The goals I have for my students are rooted in their ability to make informed decisions without relying on others to tell them what to do, how to think or feel, and (very importantly) for whom to vote. I impress upon my students that they should not just take my word on something they think might be incorrect. I want them to call me on it and find the evidence to prove me wrong! Having that kind of intellectual courage is my main goal for my students. The very success of my career and the effectiveness of my teaching rely on how well I have formed my
teacher identity. By constantly improving my inquiry process, I am improving as an educator. I have become the teacher I am today because of the skills I have learned through my connections with colleagues, my ongoing professional development sessions, and my persistent effort to improve as an educator.

References

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Today’s Student Is Tomorrow’s Leader: Creating Student Relationships through Culturally Responsive Teaching

Keba R. Cairo

Abstract

Families from all over the world leave their homeland, their lifestyle, their culture, and everything they’ve ever known to come to the United States of America, also known as the land of opportunity. America is often depicted as a “melting pot” because of the number of families of multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural backgrounds migrating into one place. These families want to give their children an upper hand, a fighting chance, an advantage in life. Immigrant parents are faced with navigating new laws, systems, and cultural differences, but they consider those sacrifices worth it for the opportunities they bring to their children. However, the children of these immigrant families face their own obstacles as they enter a school system that is insensitive to their migration journey, where they encounter students who ostracize them, and where language barriers or their accents prevent them from being understood. Although the U.S. school system is becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural, the education curriculum has not been updated to reflect and incorporate a culturally responsive and sustaining education.

Keywords: student needs, multicultural education, cultural relevance, student diversity, educational environment

Introduction

Humans crave connection and acceptance in the various spaces we inhabit and the groups we belong to. Our interpersonal connections drive our sense of acceptance and inclusivity and help us shape new groups, especially school-age students. These connections are built when we discover our similarities and gain an understanding of one another’s way of life, culture, and economic differences. As children develop and grow, school can play a vital role in helping them establish these connections. Students who are ostracized by other groups tend to internalize their emotions, which shapes the way they interact with others as adults. Beiseth and Garcia (n.d., para. 10) note that “CRT [culturally responsive teaching] gives students a chance to learn from an inclusive curriculum. It helps both you and your students understand different perspectives, appreciate others’ strengths, and build empathy.”

Background

My parents, who moved from Trinidad and Tobago to the United States when I was eight, left behind a thriving business, or what Trinidadians call a parlour, a name adopted when Trinidad and Tobago was under British rule. A parlour is a room used primarily for conversation, and our business lived up to its name. It was situated along the main road that led in and out of the city, next door to the police station, down the block from the government buildings, and directly across from the town's largest outdoor meeting place, called The Savannah. Our parlour was the only place members of our community could get delicious fruits from the neighboring countries, and everyone stopped by to purchase groceries, meet with friends, and catch up on conversations. My parents, who filled weekly orders from the banks, city employees, and local businesses, were loved and cherished by the community we lived and worked in. However, they left it all behind to chase their dream of offering more opportunities to their five children.
I did not know what to expect when my parents told us we would be leaving Trinidad and Tobago to live in the United States of America. I had heard people talk about this place they called “The States” as if the streets were paved with gold. This was a place that would have better opportunities for our family, where our dreams would come true, and where people from all over the world came together in a melting pot of goodness. I imagined that I would be welcomed by nurturing teachers who would foster my dream of becoming a news reporter. Making things even better, we would be settling in Queens, New York, one of the most diverse cities in America.

When we arrived in the Flushing neighborhood of Queens, however, I instead found myself in an education system that pushed me back a grade, with teachers who ignored me because they could not understand my beautiful Trinidadian accent, and among children who were slow to befriend me because they could not accept who I was. My dreams were crushed when a teacher told me I could not become a reporter unless I lost my accent. Coming from a place where we all had the same accent, I had never thought of it as a problem, but now I began to feel too embarrassed to speak. These events made me feel overlooked, invisible, and afraid to show my authentic self, because the true me was different from the others and, as a child, I just wanted to belong.

Although my family had moved to the most diverse borough of New York City, the diverse cultures in Queens are segregated into neighborhoods. My family first settled in a predominantly Asian community where the Chinese immigrant population outnumbered that of Manhattan’s Chinatown. Two-thirds of the residents in our bustling neighborhood were foreign-born, the vast majority from Asia. Whether you are looking for Asian cuisine, an ancient herbal remedy, or a rare
Japanese comic book, Flushing is the place to go (Hsu, 2019). However, as a child from Trinidad and Tobago, I was underrepresented and underserved in my Flushing elementary school, and the teachers never really connected with me. Perhaps they simply didn’t know how. As Breiseth and Garcia (n.d., para. 10) note, “underserved students may face implicit bias because of their race, culture, or language (implicit bias means the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes we all hold.) As a result, these students are often overrepresented in special education. Other times, their needs may go undetected.”

As I grew into my new life and time passed, so did my accent, but not without the lingering effects of feeling ostracized for my differences. Kipling D. Williams, a professor of psychological sciences, stated that “being excluded or ostracized is an invisible form of bullying that doesn’t leave bruises, and therefore we often underestimate its impact” (Williams & Nida, 2011). These early experiences crushed my expectation of finding a nurturing school environment and left a lasting negative impression that made me put up a wall of self-defense. Halevy (2017, p. 1) states that “emotions shape defensive aggression, advance knowledge on strategic choice under risk and uncertainty, and demonstrate hope’s positive effects on social interactions and relationships.”

As I grew up, I did not find people to connect with on a deep level, so I kept my friends at a safe distance in order to keep myself safe from hurt or embarrassment. I became insensitive to the opinions of people who labeled me aggressive, dismissive, or even short-tempered, but being constantly misunderstood in school drove me to build emotional walls of defense. My parents, who were now stuck at work for long hours so they could provide for their family, were able to cover our physical needs but their emotional support lay dormant. Over multiple situations and several years, I had to learn how to stand up, speak up, and defend myself because I recognized that, for anything to change, my voice needed to be heard.

According to the Mental Health Center (2019), “childhood trauma chips away at a child’s stability and sense of self, undermining self-worth and often staying with the child into adulthood.” We all have a choice to make when faced with traumatic experiences, whether we will allow it to cripple us or will use the experience to make a difference and help others. Well, I picked the latter. In 2012, after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, my six-year-old son did not want to return to school out of fear he would be shot. This experience brought back memories of my own traumatic experiences as a child, and it also reminded me of how I had longed for someone to support and empower me. I remember having to find my own courage, to learn how to stand up and advocate for myself and others, and to find my own voice. Two years later, after multiple conversations with my son in which I reinforced the importance of his voice to draw awareness to things that seem uncomfortable or suspicious, my children’s book Don’t Snooze on Clues! was born.

I now realized that I had an opportunity to help other parents start what could be a hard conversation with their kids about topics such as bullying, kids with weapons, child abduction, and other lurking dangers. The book was my way of helping parents empower their children to speak up and give them ways to communicate their discomfort to an adult. More importantly, I was able to help parents be aware of what their children are trying to communicate to them.

Don’t Snooze on Clues! was nominated in 2014 for a National Indie Excellence Award as Best Children’s Picture Book. This honor supports the fact that the book is a fun, easy-to-understand picture book that empowers children ages five to ten to communicate to an adult that a dangerous situation is happening around them. The feedback from parents has been positive:

Parenting is challenging, especially in a tech-savvy society. Don’t Snooze on Clues! is a fun and interactive book for children to dialogue with their parents/guardians about things that may seem questionable and scary. The book is a must-have, reader-friendly, and empowers children to trust their instinct and speak up.” —Karen Taylor Bass, mom and entrepreneur

Don’t Snooze on Clues! is a great read for kids and parents alike! The educational system would benefit from reinforcing the “Strange Activity” terms by using the curriculum in the classroom as a part of the life skill lessons. As a drug and violence prevention counselor
in the Department of Education, I can see how Don't Snooze on Clues! will work well with classroom presentations, safety workshops, and PTA Meetings. What a wonderful, child-appropriate way to open a discussion on subjects that may be uncomfortable. Kudos to the author Keba Cairo! —Keisha Williams, substance prevention counselor

With the lack of resources that directly address the hard topics and help guide children through real-life scenarios, I received genuine appreciation from parent readers. After countless discussions with students and families on my book tour, I began to examine the topic of bullying more closely so I could answer the questions students asked me more effectively. One particular passage (Tracy, 2012, para. 6) opened my eyes:

Those who have experienced emotional bullying are more likely to turn around and become emotional bullies themselves. Emotional bullying can have negative effects on a person's mental health. Victims often feel shame, guilt, embarrassment, and fear. These effects of emotional bullying can result in depression, low self-esteem, shyness, poor academic or job performance, & isolation.

I soon realized that much of my own childhood behavior had characteristics of emotional bullying. Because there is no physical evidence, emotional bullying, or hidden bullying as I call it in my programs, can go undetected so that we often miss the effects. If we fail to properly identify these emotions in young children and help them navigate them, the behavior often will be recycled back into the classroom.

**Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education**

Was my negative experience with the school environment the sole reason for my bullying behavior? No, there were other factors that led to my emotional bullying. Could my teacher or the curriculum have helped me to bridge the social-emotional gap? Of course! But, the education system failed me, and the lack of social and emotional connection I experienced shaped my outlook on what the system should provide, as reflected in the following:

Today's schools are increasingly multicultural and multilingual with students from diverse social and economic backgrounds. Educators and community agencies serve students with different motivations for engaging in learning, behaving positively, and performing academically. Social and emotional learning (SEL) provides a foundation for safe and positive learning, and enhances students' ability to succeed in school, careers, and life. (Weissberg, 2016, para. 1)

Today we are now involved in an intense debate about the role the school system should play in providing a culturally responsive education. Given my history with a culturally insensitive school system, of course I believe this type of education is important. However, that doesn't mean I don't have questions as to how it should be implemented, who will integrate the information into the curricula, what type of information will be provided, and how teachers will be trained in this area before bringing it to our students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us all that connections are vital, and connections are precisely what I lacked at school as a young girl who had migrated to the States and was without any friends. Breiseth and Garcia (n.d., para. 2) write that

our brains are wired to make connections. It's easier for our brains to learn and store information when we have a hook to hang it on. That hook is background knowledge. Students bring this knowledge to the classroom every day, including their culture, language, and life experiences.

A culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum is one that is infused with information students can find relatable, that they can draw from in their lives, and, more importantly, that teaches children about cultures other than their own:
Culturally responsive teaching could possibly move schools away from approaching instruction with a deficit mindset. (A deficit mindset would focus on what a student can’t do.) Instead, CRT identifies students’ assets and uses them to create rigorous, student-centered instruction. This is especially important for students from underserved groups whose skills are often underestimated. (Breiseth and Garcia, para. 7).

As leaders at the forefront of education, it is our job to acknowledge that everyone brings something to the table that we can all learn from. As Breiseth and Garcia (n.d., para. 4) point out, “culturally responsive teaching . . . helps create environments, curricula, and instructional methods that validate and reflect the diversity, identities, and experiences of all students. When we do that, we raise the level of academic rigor for all learners. It also sends the message that educators value all students, and that multiculturalism is an asset.” As schools become increasingly diverse, building students’ self-confidence, teaching them to accept others’ differences, promoting inclusivity, and working as a team are all life skills that can help students of diverse backgrounds integrate into the classroom community.

I’ve created a company with the same name as my children’s book, Don’t Snooze on Clues, where my mission is to provide today’s K-12 children with tools for tomorrow’s world. We focus on our belief that life-skills courses can play an integral part in students’ overall development. As Prajapati et al. (2016, p. 3) state,

life skills training/education takes into account psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help students to make right decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with managing their lives in a healthy and productive manner.

Breiseth and Garcia (n.d., p. 3) further support the importance of life skills education and offer several activities for the classroom:

There are various past research indications of life skills being implemented as a training program, as an intervention approach and a model contributing to healthy development of adolescents . . . In the following section researchers have tried . . . with the help of simple activities [to show how] it can be implemented in classroom settings. Different activities that can be used to enhance Life Skills in Students are as follows:

**Classroom Discussions:** An activity [that] provides opportunities for students to learn and practice turning to one another in solving problems. Enables students to deepen their understanding of the topic and personalize their connection to it. Develops skills in listening, assertiveness, and empathy.

**Brainstorming:** It allows students to generate ideas quickly and spontaneously. Helps students use their imagination and think out of the box. Good discussion starter because the class can creatively generate ideas. It is essential to evaluate the pros and cons of each idea or rank ideas according to certain criteria.

**Role Plays:** Along with being a fun activity and allowing the whole class to be active and participative, it also provides an excellent strategy for practicing skills; experiencing how one might handle a potential situation in real life; increasing empathy for others and their point of view; and increasing insight into their own feelings.

**Groups:** Groups are helpful when the time is limited as it maximizes student input. Allows students interactions, allows them to know one another better[,] which in a way enhances team building and teamwork.

**Educational Games and Simulations:** It promotes fun, active learning, and rich discussion as participants work hard to prove their points or earn points. They require the combined use of knowledge, attitudes, and skills and allow students to test out assumptions and abilities in a relatively safe environment.
As noted above, classroom discussions, brainstorming, role-playing, groups, educational games and simulations are all activities that enhance life skills and are embedded into the fabric of quality programs. At Don't Snooze on Clues, we provide after-school and virtual programs that use a project-based learning approach inspired by social-emotional learning (SEL), as Breiseth and Garcia explain: "When you plan social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons, you can use that knowledge to make sure your lessons value your students. By pairing SEL with CRT, you can also help students navigate multiple contexts both inside and outside of school" (n.d., para. 12).

Don't Snooze on Clues focuses on lessons that are not a part of the usual school curriculum but are aligned with New York City Department of Education standards. We center our SEL-inspired lessons around four core topics: character building, effective leadership, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship. In our character-building course, we teach students the six pillars of good character and how they relate to each other, as well as the relationship between respect and trust and the role of caring in good citizenship. Our effective leadership course focuses on identifying the characteristics of strong leaders, discovering types of leadership styles, recognizing why it's important for leaders to give a voice to all, and why teamwork is a crucial part of leadership. In our financial literacy course, students learn the fundamentals of making, spending, and saving money. This topic is critical to helping students invest in their future, and it also helps them build confidence and self-awareness. Lastly, our entrepreneurship course pulls the other three courses together to show students how their developed SEL skills can help them build relationships with their customers, make responsible decisions, and run a business efficiently.

One of our high school students at Hofstra University's Science Technology Entry Program commented on our course:

I advise other students to take this course, because it is not just a class where you sit and write information, do a test, or do homework. No, it's not like that! It's interactive, you put yourself out there. It can help to motivate students and have them thinking of what they want them to be. I wanted to take this class, it was fun, I learned a lot and I applied a lot.

All of our courses enable students to reflect on their own behavior, build their social skills, and improve their interactions with others. Our after-school courses are designed so that students engage with their peers in a collaborative atmosphere that includes pairing and group activities. Each course offers opportunities for students to dive deeper into their thinking while enjoying activities that are rigorously challenging and engaging. As noted by Durlak et al. (2010), research has shown that after-school programs focused on social and emotional development can significantly enhance students' self-perception, school connectedness, positive social behaviors, school grades, and achievement test scores, while reducing problem behaviors.

In response to schools shutting down and going virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic, Don't Snooze on Clues launched an online platform, www.DontSnoozeAcademy.com, where we were able to make our courses 100% virtual. Facilitated by licensed industry professionals and Department of Education certified educators who specialize in student social and emotional health, our online courses provide unlimited 24/7 access to our modules and instructors via chat, which provides students with the extra support they need beyond the classroom. Our online courses also include individual log-in, progress reports, pre/post assessments, and access to our growing catalog, which now includes courses in mental health, financial literacy, college and career readiness, cooking and nutrition, technology, language, and more.

I have emphasized in this paper how important it is for people to feel connected to their social groups, coworkers, families, and even to their education. A culturally responsive and sustaining education is a proven way to help students connect their education to the world they live in, but this connection can only be made if this model of education fully reflects the diversity of our communities. Programs such as those we provide at Don't Snooze on Clues and www.DontSnoozeAcademy.com can help create opportunities for students to connect to and learn from each other by having classroom discussions where everyone's voice is heard.
References


Keba R. Cairo, MBA, has spent more than 15 years cultivating her craft and sharpening her skills. Keba was named a 2015 Goodwill Ambassador by the iChange Nations Interfaith Peace Building Initiative for her continuous community work. In 2015, her children’s book, Don’t Snooze on Clues, was nominated as Best Picture Book by the National Indie Excellence Awards. Keba can be reached at keba@dontsnoozeonclues.com.
Commentaries on Urban Education

Proposed Teaching Strategies for Black and Latinx Studies in Connecticut

Abstract

In 2020, Connecticut became the first U.S. state to require all public high schools to offer Black and Latinx studies. This monumental decision has raised a fair amount of concern over what constitutes effective and conscientious teaching practices for Black and Latinx studies at the classroom level. In this paper, I propose several teaching strategies, all grounded in critical, dialectical, and responsive theories of pedagogical praxis. I deliberate on the strengths and potential weaknesses of each approach with equal attention, and at the end of each section I offer some examples of how these strategies can be applied in the classroom. I conclude by restating how important Black and Latinx studies are in facilitating the reimagining of educational practice and classroom pedagogies throughout Connecticut.

Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogy, problem-posing education, multiculturalism, interculturalism

Introduction

On December 9, 2020, Governor Ned Lamont of Connecticut issued a declaration requiring all public high schools in the state to offer African American, Black, Latinx, and Puerto Rican studies as part of the social studies curriculum (Office of Governor Lamont, 2020)—the first U.S. state to do so. Connecticut's public high schools are now required to offer a one-year, full-credit elective course on these subjects beginning in fall 2022, at the latest. The curriculum contains two units, the first semester focusing on Black and African American history and the second on Latinx and Puerto Rican history (Connecticut in Color, 2021). This declaration came a year after Lamont signed Public Act No. 19-12, a bill passed with bipartisan support, which directs local and regional education boards throughout the state to give students the opportunity to learn about the historic, cultural, and economic contributions Blacks and Latinx have made in the United States.

The proposed curriculum will address the construction of race, analyze the intersection of race, power, and privilege, and articulate the role Black and Latinx communities have played in shaping U.S. society (Connecticut Proceeding, 2020). In an increasingly racially diverse state, where 27% of students identify as Latinx or Hispanic and 13% as Black or African American (Asmelash & Sturla, 2020), this unprecedented decision rightfully acknowledges the experiences of Connecticut's Black and Latinx community members and, importantly, could encourage other U.S. states to follow suit.

Prime facie, the introduction of these courses seems a laudable move toward acknowledging the histories and cultures of people of color and weaving them into the larger tapestry of American history. However, the fact that these courses are only electives raises reasonable doubts about the extent to which they can help bring about the kind of systemic change that, as one state representative commented, can lead to better race relations and a more inclusive state (Aggarwal, 2020). As a person of color who was raised and educated in Connecticut and has firsthand experience of what it’s like to be a student of color in a social studies class at a predominantly White high school, I view the aims of this new policy with a fair amount of skepticism. I wonder, for example, how the new curriculum will be taught statewide, given that social studies instruction differs across the state's public high schools and that the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic demographics of communities across Connecticut are highly disparate.

My purpose in this paper is not to speculate about the stakeholders' underlying intentions, nor is it to critique the curriculum itself. My aim, rather, is to spark discussion around what should
constitute effective and conscionable teaching practice for Black and Latinx studies in Connecticut classrooms and to propose several effective teaching strategies that can help the new curriculum bring about transformation in the classroom. By effective teaching strategies, I refer to those grounded in critical theory that will foster critical reflection among students and teachers. I first recommend critical multiculturalism and interculturalism (Barrett, 2013; May & Sleeter, 2010). I maintain that the success of Black and Latinx studies in Connecticut will depend equally on applying a uniform critical pedagogy statewide, one that prioritizes conversations around structural racism and the unequal power relations that exist outside the classroom, and on a transformation of the teacher-student relationship. Therefore, I advocate for the adoption of a problem-posing education model driven by dialogical theory of praxis and knowledge (Bartlett, 2005; Freire, 2000). I also call for the state to promote culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014) aimed at uplifting and celebrating Black and Latinx communities rather than reinforcing monolithic or stereotypical notions of Black and Latinx identities. I conclude with suggestions for how teachers of Black and Latinx studies can adopt and implement these strategies, with the hope of normalizing their use in every classroom in Connecticut.

**Strategy 1: Critical Multiculturalism and Interculturalism**

Critical multiculturalism is rooted in the convergence of antiracist education and critical race theory. As a teaching approach, it foregrounds sociological understandings of identity and encourages critical analysis of the structural inequalities that differentially impact minoritized groups (May & Sleeter, 2010). Critical multiculturalism denounces the construction of minoritized students in deficit terms and frames culture within the context of the unequal power relations that are lived out in daily interactions. It also creates spaces where students can share their personal histories of racial and ethnic discrimination or other experiences of marginalization. As students are given the agency to interrogate the perceptions of themselves conveyed by mainstream ideologies, they can become their own source of cultural knowledge. The classroom thus will be transformed into a safe haven where the teacher strives to make students feel comfortable unpacking everyday instances of racial and ethnic injustice.

Connecticut educators must view the new Black and Latinx studies curriculum as an opportunity to engage students in introspection and in analyzing the institutionalized inequalities that occur locally and across the U.S. The school is a microcosm of society that can either reify wider structural constraints or dismantle them. Banks (1993, p. 33) conceptualizes the school as a cultural system with “a specific set of values, norm, ethos, and shared meanings.” It is within the school boundaries that students internalize institutionalized conceptions of themselves that are made commonplace by power structures reflective of the external environment. In a 2019 focus group hosted and organized by the State Education Research Center (SERC), Black and Latinx students in Connecticut reported feeling that they only learn “White man’s history,” which results in further division between “their America” and “White Man’s America” (SERC, 2020b). In a 2020 state hearing, Connecticut youths vocalized their collective pain and frustration, demonstrating wisdom beyond their years. As one student testified,

> Growing up Black, I rarely felt that my history was discussed in school, except during the month of February. Even then we were taught a sugar-coated version of this history centered around a smooth transition from a violent racist society to a peaceful equitable one that we were supposedly living in. (SERC, 2020c)

Another student claimed that the traditional social studies curriculum only scratches the surface of the unique cultures and histories of their people (Blanks, 2020). These students clearly yearn for a learning environment that wholly legitimizes their cultural identities and does not omit the factual consequences of White supremacy in the U.S. The critical multiculturalist approach can satisfy the needs of these learners by offering a more visceral method for Connecticut educators to teach Black and Latinx studies. This would mean genuinely grappling in the classroom with normative assumptions around race and ethnicity and enabling students to gain skill in open discourse on the systemic racial/ethnic oppression functioning at the macro level. An example of a multiculturalist approach in action would be when a teacher supplements lesson plans with activities that challenge...
the monolithic treatment of Black and Latinx people, and encourages students from these communities to share their unique customs and ideologies.

Akin to critical multiculturalism, interculturalism is also concerned with tackling the underlying structural disadvantages and inequities experienced by marginalized groups (Barrett, 2013). However, the central emphasis of interculturalism is on intercultural dialogue that helps to reduce prejudice and stereotypes in society. For example, through focus group discussions, marginalized peoples enjoy an equal platform where they can engage in constructive dialogue with members of dominant groups that promotes mutual understanding and respect. In this way, dialogue becomes a force that can promote social cohesion between members of dominant and marginalized groups. Therefore, the intercultural classroom relies on teachers and students to use dialogue to break down prejudice and superficial stereotypes.

Reflecting on the potential weaknesses of critical multiculturalism and interculturalism, it goes without saying that mere discussion of racial/ethnic discrimination and social inequalities will not break down the dominating power structures outside of the classroom. In implementing the new Black and Latinx studies curriculum, Connecticut educators should not overestimate the power of critical analysis and intercultural dialogue, and they must communicate to students that the new curriculum will not necessarily translate into changes in racialized institutions beyond the school.

Although critical multiculturalism and interculturalism cannot erase the hierarchy of privilege or status differentials in the classroom, Connecticut's new Black and Latinx studies curriculum could serve as a starting point for dialogue between teachers and students. However, educators considering teaching this curriculum from either of these critical standpoints must tread carefully along the line between empowering students by teaching the histories of Black and Latinx peoples and suggesting that the course is a panacea for the oppression still occurring throughout the U.S.

Strategy 2: Problem-Posing Education

The success of Connecticut's Black and Latinx studies curriculum is contingent upon the transformation of teacher-student relations, as driven by problem-posing education (PPE), which is a liberatory praxis rooted in love and mutual respect in teacher-student relationships (Bartlett, 2005; Freire, 2000). This critical theory of education practice contrasts with what Freire (2000) describes as the banking model of education, wherein learners are considered the passive recipients of knowledge: they are presumed not to have any prior knowledge or inherent intelligence and are expected simply to absorb information “deposited” into their minds by their teachers. This kind of transaction raises communication barriers between teachers and students, whereas PPE narrows, if not eliminates, the social distance between them. It is a transformative model that promotes dialogue in the learning process as a means to create reciprocal relationships and solidarity between students and teachers (Bartlett, 2005). The model gives students from marginalized and non-dominant cultural backgrounds the tools to name, evaluate, and understand their world while also questioning the interests of those in power. In contrast to interculturalism, which is also based in dialogue, PPE is specific to educational settings; its foremost goal is to revolutionize the teacher-student dynamic as a way to create social change.

Applying the PPE approach to Black and Latinx studies will provide an opening to lower the communication barriers created by racial disparities between Connecticut's teachers and students. It is well known that Connecticut needs to increase the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. A 2019 survey revealed that fewer than 10% of Connecticut teachers identified as teachers of color (Jones, 2020); in roughly half of the state's school districts Black and Latinx teachers are less than 3%. In contrast, nearly 40% of students in Connecticut schools are students of color. Some of these students lament that they don’t see themselves reflected in their school's teaching staff (Jones, 2020). The introduction of Black and Latinx studies as an elective course will not compensate for the obvious need for more educators of color in Connecticut.

With respect to PPE, White teachers of Black or Latinx studies in Connecticut can gain the confidence and trust of students of color by making their positionality known at the start of the course.
To legitimately claim a progressive or liberatory position, White teachers must first thoroughly examine their own inherent privilege, as well as their own possible complicity in the perpetuation of racist ideologies (Freire, 2000). White teachers must reach this state of awareness before they can truly support students of colors’ development of critical social analytical skills, which is only half of the PPE experience. One small but critical act would be for White teachers to present a personal positionality statement to their students early in the course. These statements should include what White privilege looks like from their perspective.

The other half of PPE, and its essence, lies in the reversal of the teacher and student roles (Bartlett, 2005). The teacher-student transformation process is predicated on the transfer of knowledge from student to teacher knowledge. In Connecticut, students of color need to be empowered to take control of their own learning. White hegemony remains a strong characteristic across all public domains, including education, thus the new Black and Latinx studies curriculum should center on the lived experiences of Black and Latinx students. The voices of Black and Latinx students must be at the forefront of PPE, and White teachers in Connecticut must give students of color the space to express their anguish and unfiltered opinions and honor their refusal to accept depictions of themselves as fashioned by White supremacy. Allowing students to become agents in their own learning is a tremendous introductory step in the PPE process. A concrete example of how teachers can do this is by providing opportunities for Black and Latinx students to lead class discussions in which they are comfortable sharing their empirical knowledge and lived experiences as people of color. The new curriculum will be instrumental in starting these difficult conversations, but the real teacher-student transformation will come about through a praxis founded in mutual love and respect, one that challenges the complex notions of power and oppression (Bartlett, 2005).

The limitations of PPE cited most often are its abstraction and difficult application in education practice. The model is derived from Freire's critical theory of education, which some argue is too far removed from everyday practice. Opponents to its use claim that PPE is limited by its impracticality and inability to subvert a domineering rational pedagogy, a theory of education conjectured from the works of Pierre Bourdieu in which non-dominant groups are resigned to making decisions aligned with the dominant class for the sake of social mobility (Burawoy & Von Holdt, 2012). Education systems across the U.S. continually inculcate students of color under deprivation paradigms and rational pedagogies. Many of us, especially those of us from working-class families, are made to believe that we are underachieving and that the only way to achieve in education is to follow pathways to success laid out by well-to-do White people. Buying into these myths will never disrupt racial power structures in education or in other public spheres; only PPE can do this. Connecticut educators should note that the greatest limitation of PPE is its lack of implementation. If PPE or dialogical praxis is applied in Connecticut, state and local education boards can anticipate groundbreaking results from the addition of Black and Latinx studies.

**Strategy 3: Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Pedagogies**

Offering Black and Latinx studies courses can help to transform the teacher-student relationship and promote greater mutual understanding, which in turn can create a learning environment that supports culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies. Ladson-Billings (1995) describes culturally relevant pedagogy as a student-centered approach by which students learn to accept and affirm their cultural identities while developing critical perspectives that challenge the inequalities perpetuated by schools and other institutions. Culturally sustaining pedagogies similarly challenge educators to promote, celebrate, and critique the multiple and shifting ways students engage with culture, both in and outside the classroom (Paris & Alim, 2014). Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy enables educators to help students develop an understanding of and appreciation for cultural differences and to value cultural competency. The implementation of this pedagogical practice in Connecticut will be a critical component of the Black and Latinx studies curriculum and related activities.

Fortunately, Connecticut currently advocates for culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies across its schools under the term “culturally responsive education” (CRE). On February 3, 2021,
the Connecticut State Board of Education (SBE) approved a revised position statement on CRE, as the former version had not been updated in ten years. The former version was bogged down with tenets and objectives that delimited possibilities for critical education reform. CRE was described primarily as a means to increase student achievement and engagement (SBE, 2012). Its guidelines for policymakers included language on teachers’ responsibilities, such as “maintaining high expectations of all students regardless of functional background” and “recognize that the culture of students of color may differ dramatically with the classroom and school” (SBE, 2012, p. 5). Most of the principles expressed in the first version felt like a devolution from asset-based pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2014), as some statements actually seemed to regress the work of culturally relevant pedagogy.

The current conceptualization of CRE in Connecticut now centers on developing students’ and teachers’ critical consciousness in tandem with socio-political awareness, cultural competency, and academic achievement. The latest CRE position calls for Connecticut educators to “become conduits of learning by affirming their content expertise through their own identities” (SBE, 2021, p. 1), and teachers receive clear instruction on what it takes to apply CRE effectively. The updated statement typifies three actions vital to implementing culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010, 2013). First, deficit perspectives of students and their communities are replaced by asset-based approaches that capitalize on students’ diversity via co-construction of knowledge. Students’ own knowledge and unique cultural competencies are given value in the classroom; students and their families are positioned as informants in the learning process. Second, teachers are encouraged to provide a classroom environment in which students’ diverse backgrounds are equally recognized and uplifted. Finally, teachers are guided in how to make pedagogical connections in their teaching contexts through partnering with students and their families to build toward CRE that is informed by community-based knowledge. For example, the statement includes a call for families and community partners to work with schools to empower their children to use and embrace their cultural identities in the classroom. This type of community involvement would help Black and Latinx students feel more supported in their learning. In my view, there are virtually no weaknesses in culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, although complications can arise if educators misinterpret or water down the approach.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I described and examined several critical pedagogies that can be used in teaching the new Black and Latinx studies curriculum in Connecticut. I discussed the merits and critiques of critical multiculturalism, interculturalism, problem-posing education, and culturally relevant education. Although I presented these strategies in a particular order, this is not to suggest that each build on the others or that they should be scaffolded in any specific way. My goal is to prompt discussion among Connecticut teachers about the importance of incorporating critical pedagogy in their teaching strategy and to encourage them to develop productive ways of transferring theory into practice. Connecticut educators who seek radical change in racial/ethnic relations in the classroom and in their communities must be courageous in adopting such critical praxes as their mainstream teaching style. Teachers should carefully choose which elements of these strategies would best fit their unique classroom contexts.

As a person of color and former pupil in the Connecticut public education system, I am honored to have been educated in a state that is leading a new “first” in the history of education in America: an exemplary move to include the histories of Black and Latinx peoples in this country at a time when critical discussions around race in the K-12 classroom are considered virtually taboo in some other states. As proud as I am of this achievement, knowing what it is like to be a student of color at a predominantly White high school in Connecticut, I am concerned that the new Black and Latinx studies course offerings will not be successful without commensurate changes in how teachers instruct and relate to students of color. I know what it’s like to experience microaggressions in the classroom and to feel unsafe as a young person of color in the learning environment. In my own experience, I was one of the few Black students in my honors and AP social studies courses. I cringed inside whenever we got to discussing African American history or the experiences of people of...
color in the U.S. My Blackness became hypervisible whenever we discussed these histories, and I can still hear some of the ignorant racist comments made by my White peers. Once a kid jokingly compared me to an image of a Black slave in one of our textbooks, but I was too unfazed to call them out or report them to a teacher or school official. In fact, the thought did not even occur to me. By that point in time, I was already too desensitized to hearing anti-Black sentiments at school. I now wholeheartedly believe that those social studies courses would have been impactful if critical pedagogies were at the heart of teaching strategy. I imagine my experience would have been more positive if I felt comfortable openly sharing my own racial, ethnic, and cultural experience with my White teachers and peers. I would have loved to engage in deeper conversations about the history of race, power and privilege in the U.S., in addition to the contributions made by peoples of color. It would be wrong of me to say here that I was never provided these spaces. I did have some teachers who tried to create such opportunities; however, it was rare and not the norm.

The passing of Public Act No. 19-12 in Connecticut has also renewed conversations around making Native American studies a required course offering across public high schools (Asmelash & Sturla, 2020), again as an elective. I argue that stakeholders should seize the moment and make compulsory both Black and Latinx studies and other courses that explore the history and contributions of people of color. Teaching strategies that increase awareness of wider social inequities, inspire transformational dialogue, and promote sustainable cultural practices can help to bring about radical change in the classroom and establish a model for future curricular updates.

**Appendix**

**APPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Actions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical multiculturalism</td>
<td>Recognize cultural differences as a source of empowerment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inspire students to interrogate and analyze the structural inequalities that govern their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interculturalism</td>
<td>Surpass passive acceptance of multiculturalism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stress communication and dialogue across racial and ethnic boundaries to reduce prejudice and stereotypes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-posing education</td>
<td>Examine your individual privilege or your complicity in the perpetuation of racism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage transfer of knowledge from student to teacher through dialogue rooted in mutual love and respect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Believe in critical dialogue as a powerful instrument for upending power imbalances in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally relevant and sustaining education</td>
<td>Make pedagogical connections to the local cultural context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage students to develop self-affirmation of their own cultural identities.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Suggestions**

- Supplement lesson plans with cultural content that challenges static or unidimensional stereotypes about Black and Latinx peoples.
- Allow time for student-led focus groups at the end of each unit.
- Create artistic spaces for critical self-reflection around identity and power.
- Share positionality statements with students.
- Hold meetings to check in with students and respond accordingly to their social and emotional needs.
- Invite Black and Latinx parents and community members to contribute to classroom discussions or activities.
Endnotes
1 Throughout this paper, I use the term Latinx in place of Latino as stated in the actual bill. Latinx is a more inclusive term to refer to people of Latin American descent who don’t wish to be identified by their gender.

References

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For “KEEPS”: Empowering Student Educators’ Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Classroom Practices

Julie M. Milner, Helena Fisher, Joe Melendez, and Teeyana Thomas

Abstract

To close the equity gap in our urban students’ academic achievement, educators must be well-versed in critical values. KEEPS, an acronym for knowledge, enquiry, empathy, pluralism and social commitment, is utilized in the Teaching and Learning Department on the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University to empower educators of urban students to implement culturally responsive and sustaining education (CR-SE) practices in their classrooms. The KEEPS values provide student educators with the tools they need to work to the KEEPS claims, which are designed to be universal so that any educator who chooses to embrace them can become more culturally responsive in a manner that values and celebrates their students’ cultural identities and backgrounds. The KEEPS framework provides a solid foundation in CR-SE pedagogical practices and assists educators in reflecting on their teaching identities and work in the classroom. When educators integrate and implement the KEEPS framework, it helps them to remove the systemic barriers faced by their struggling learners. The KEEPS claims, which are designed to operationalize the domains of knowledge, enquiry, empathy, pluralism, and social commitment, are universal so that any educator who chooses to embrace them can become more culturally responsive in their own practice.

Keywords: culturally responsive and sustaining education (CR-SE), teacher education, positive student-teacher relationships, positive academic outcomes

Introduction

The nation’s education system is failing our urban children of color. When I (Milner) was in law school nearly two decades ago, the original Schott Report sounded the alarm about the crisis of Black male students in education. They not only were far behind in all measures, but they also were fueling what is now referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline. One stark example from the report was that 10% of the nation’s Black male students were located in Chicago and New York City, cities in which 70% of Black students failed to graduate high school (Holzman, 2004, p. 4). Nearly two decades later, not much has changed. In fact, with the need to rely on remote learning due to COVID-19, the equity gap has worsened. This is a national emergency and human rights issue that must finally be addressed.

In March 2018, Mayor Bill De Blasio appointed Richard Carranza to be the New York City schools chancellor. Carranza implemented an agenda of equity and excellence that mandated implicit bias training for all staff members. Then COVID-19 hit and derailed this important effort to achieve equity and excellence for the city’s 1.1 million students (New York City Department of Education, 2020). Neither the mayor nor the chancellor had an effective plan in place for the transition to remote learning, so teachers were left to scramble to meet their students’ learning needs. To the chancellor’s credit, he was able to supply 231,000 students with iPads that had a data plan, but as of this writing, 225,000 more were still waiting for devices (Edelman, 2020). The mayor announced in early 2020 that all homeless shelters would be equipped with internet in order to support the 114,000 students who reside there; however, this was not implemented until spring 2021 (Coalition for the Homeless, 2020). The unique challenges created by COVID-19 opened uncharted territory for education researchers and practitioners to determine best practices. While the crisis provided opportunities to try new strategies, it is imperative to ground them in what has already been proven.
Empathy as the Key to CR-SE

Twenty years after the Schott Report, we are still seeking ways to close the equity gaps so that all children can achieve excellence in education. Teacher empathy is the key to building strong relationships with urban students. Strong student-teacher relationships improve outcomes such as attendance, retention, grades, test scores, and college-readiness. However, there is a gap in the research on the development of empathy among teachers. A literature review on the subject failed to find methods in teacher preparation programs that operationalize empathy for urban students (Warren, 2018). The KEEPS values we instill in our student educators at Long Island University (LIU) do just this.

The teacher education program on LIU’s Brooklyn campus is centered on helping student educators develop empathy for their students, which is a crucial component of culturally relevant education. In this paper, we explore how LIU teaches empathy as a CR-SE pedagogical concept and how we operationalize it through KEEPS.

Making Empathy Culturally Responsive

Strong student-teacher relationships are rooted in empathy (Milner, 2007; Warren, 2018) and result in positive outcomes for students of color, such as higher grades, lower dropout rates, improved test scores, and lower suspension rates (Decker & Christenson, 2007). In fact, strong student-teacher relationships can mitigate the disparities stemming from socioeconomic status, trauma, poor nutrition, environmental toxins, and a lack of maternal bonding (Decker & Christenson, 2007). Culturally responsive educators who show empathy for their students are able to connect with the social and historical contexts of students’ experiences and thus to understand and accept each student as a whole and complex being (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Noddings, 2012). The teacher who shows empathy is “simply listening, holding space, withholding judgment, emotionally connecting and communicating that incredibly healing message of ‘You’re not alone’” (Brown, 2015, p. 54). Noddings (2012) describes it as learning to “feel’ what the other is going through or something congruent with the other’s feelings” (p. 775). Delpit (2012) sees empathy as the key to students’ success: “When students believe that the teacher cares for them and is concerned about them, they will frequently rise to the expectations set” (p. 82). However, it is not enough for students to know that they are cared for; they also must be taught to have empathy toward those around them (Noddings, 2012). Ladson-Billings (2009) notes that caring teachers are better able to empower their students to tackle social problems that affect their community.

Many scholars write about empathy, but few have operationalized it in a way that specifically serves Black and Brown learners (Warren, 2018). Milner (2007) sees empathy through the lens of racial discord. A Black professor who teaches mostly White female aspiring teachers, Milner brings to his classes his own narratives of the racism and microaggressions he regularly experiences. Sharing these experiences creates the level of discomfort needed that prompts his students to begin the process of deconstructing their privilege (Milner, 2007). However, this method only offers a narrow view of empathy. Although Warren (2018) was unable to locate the best practices for cultivating empathy in student educators, his analysis of the culturally responsive scholarship of researchers such as Delpit, Ladson-Billings, Gay, and others enabled him to construct a framework for cultivating empathy through a process of perspective-taking steeped in critical self-reflection (2018, Table 1).

Educating Teachers in CR-SE: Best Practices

Teacher education programs must prepare teachers for the diverse cultures of the students they will teach, including awareness and acceptance of these differences (Milner et al., 2003; Delpit, 1988/2012). Milner et al. (2003) offer a roadmap for cultivating cultural responsiveness in new teachers, stating that they must first be taught to self-reflect, which is critical to improving praxis. Second, the pedagogical approach must help teachers come to terms with their personal beliefs and to understand their racial and cultural capital. Finally, teachers must be taught to understand the power structures so that they can be role models rather than perpetrators of unconscious bias (Milner et al. 2003, p. 69).
Through his exhaustive literature review, Warren (2018) found evidence of culturally responsive classroom practices. Citing the work of Ladson-Billings, Warren asserts that “academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical awareness” can be achieved by “the application of empathy through perspectives taking” (2018, p. 3). This approach enables students to believe that their teacher cares for them and values them as a vital member of the classroom community. Referencing the works found in his extensive review (Howard, 2010; Paris & Alim, 2014/2017; and Gay, 2010), Warren further posits that students perceive “that their ethnic or racial identity, cultural pride, and heritage are sustained and regularly affirmed” when the “majority of classroom learning experiences are directly relevant to, and reflective of, students’ home lives and cultural experiences outside of school” (p. 3). In order to build a cultural connection with their students, he states, the teacher must activate empathy to acquire the requisite knowledge they will need to inform practice.

**Teaching KEEPS**

During my students’ final semester in the capstone course, they engage in critical self-reflection on their journey to becoming a teacher and articulate their pedagogical beliefs and values. They write about some of their students’ strengths and challenges and how they leverage their cultural capital to ensure success. They then connect these practices to the KEEPS claims, and critically assess how well they have mastered the framework and explain how they will improve their craft going forward.

The KEEPS values, which are unique to LIU’s Brooklyn campus, were designed to guide new urban educators to meet rising academic standards while engaging with the unique strengths and experiences of urban students they serve (LIU, 2020). Each of the KEEPS domains represent the qualities desired in urban educators:

- **KNOWLEDGE** and intellectual inquisitiveness about children, schools, and the world.
- **ENQUIRY**, or the collective discipline of observation, reflection, and non-judgmental description of children and their schoolwork, as well as descriptive inquiry of teaching and professional practice.
- **EMPATHY** that rests on human uniqueness and the capacity to develop, as well as responsiveness to the needs and interests of urban learners and communities.
- **PLURALISM** and attention to differences and to inclusion of all in the learning community of schools and the wider community.
- **SOCIAL COMMITMENT** and the building of a just and democratic society.

Student educators engage with each of these values during their time at LIU. They have been operationalized as follows.

**Student Educators’ Narratives on Their Culturally Responsive Practices**

I invited three of my former students who had expressed interest in publishing their work to co-author this piece with me. Their reflections on the KEEPS values one year after completing the capstone course highlighted the ways they have become culturally responsive educators.

**Helena Fisher’s Narrative**

Helena Fisher is a special education teacher of color in a Title I school. She grew up traveling around the world, as her father served in the air force. The support she received from her teachers at age 16 after the death of her mother shaped her conception of an ideal teacher and inspired her to teach. Her own experience enabled her to recognize the importance of empathy in building strong relationships with her students.
TABLE 1. KEEPS CLAIMS (REVISED MAY 2015)

KNOWLEDGE
K 1: Students are intellectually rooted in the liberal arts and sciences and the foundations of education.
K 2: Students are knowledgeable about self, theory, practice, and/or child development within sociocultural/linguistic contexts.
K 3: Students use knowledge of self, theory, practice, and/or child development within sociocultural/linguistic contexts to create appropriate learning environments and to teach in urban settings.
K 4: Students are knowledgeable of the strengths of urban families, schools, classrooms, and communities.
K 5: Students use knowledge of the strengths of urban families, schools, classrooms, and communities to create appropriate learning environments and to teach in urban settings.
K 6: Students are knowledgeable of the strengths of urban families, schools, classrooms, and communities.
K 7: Students are knowledgeable of the strengths of urban families, schools, classrooms, and communities.
K 8: Students use knowledge of self, theory, practice, and/or child development within sociocultural/linguistic contexts.
K 9: Students apply knowledge of self, theory, practice, and/or child development within sociocultural/linguistic contexts to create appropriate learning environments and to teach in urban settings.
K 10: Students utilize knowledge of self, family, school, community, and professional resources and literature to construct knowledge.
K 11: Students demonstrate skill in written expression for academic and professional purposes.

EMPATHY
Em 1: Students know and appreciate that no two students are alike.
Em 2: Students care for and believe in the potential of their students.
Em 3: Students know to gain knowledge of their students’ strengths, interests, and feelings.
Em 4: Students use knowledge of their students’ strengths, interests, and feelings to motivate and teach.
Em 5: Students know what is needed to create a caring community of learners.
Em 6: Students create caring communities of learners.

PLURALISM
P 1: Students are aware of their own values and assumptions and question their biases as they relate to issues of diversity.
P 2: Students demonstrate understanding/appreciation of the heritages, life experiences, and historical backgrounds of diverse social, cultural, and linguistic groups in our society and schools.
P 3: Students implement a range of instructional approaches and strategies that are needed to educate diverse learners in a variety of contexts.

SOCIAL COMMITMENT
S 1: Students understand their role and responsibility in advocating for equitable and appropriate educational services for children and their families.
S 2: Students understand their role and responsibility in improving classrooms, schools, and/or communities.
S 3: Students demonstrate academic integrity, professional responsibility, and ethical behavior in their scholarship and practice.

The numbered claims listed under each of the KEEPS domains are not an exhaustive list of what each domain stands for; rather, they are universal guides that can be easily implemented.
An ideal teacher is prepared not only to teach but to guide students through the learning process. They should be willing to go the extra mile in order to see their students succeed. As a teacher, I want the classroom to be a place where my students get the most out of their time with me. This includes having classroom management and having control over behaviors that may occur. My teacher performance observations reflect my tenacity in developing relationships with my students and creating a safe learning environment. This is extremely important to my practice, as without the foundation of good relationships, I would have a harder time delivering the knowledge my students need to progress. These relationships are, of course, shaped by my role as a teacher, but they also are informed by own perspective as a student, which has helped me develop an awareness of the struggles my students face when learning new content.

Helena’s approach to showing that she cares deeply for them is consistent with that of Noddings (2012) and Ladson-Billings (2009), and despite a rocky first year, it enabled her to build strong relationships and address deficiencies in her job performance ratings. She reflects:

We teachers have responsibilities beyond merely teaching in front of a group of students, such as developing relationships, getting to know and advocating for our students, and creating a classroom environment where our students feel it is a place for them. I believe developing good relationships with my students sets the foundation for having success in all areas in the classroom: cooperation, focus, participation, and learning. All begin with knowing my students, which enables us to develop a relationship and partnership in the classroom. Our strong relationships with our students are rooted in the KEEPS claims knowledge and pluralism.

By getting to know her students and their needs, Helena can create a safe and welcoming environment that is conducive to learning. Her students respond to the positive classroom culture by adhering to behavior norms and engaging with the lessons. Helena’s success in this area enabled her to turn around her initial low performance ratings to be ranked effective. She recalls:

Focusing on relationships with students has honed my classroom management skills and led to my “effective” rating in the areas of “Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport” and “Managing Student Behavior.” When starting at the new school last September, I was determined to better myself and not let the previous school year determine my new year. This year I am the grade team leader, I am on the consultation committee, and I have been named “teacher of the month” twice.

When a new teacher feels empowered by the strong relationships built with students and is validated by positive reinforcement from administrators, the students’ academic success is inevitable. I have low-level readers in my classes who have improved dramatically. One student has improved by two grade levels, and another has increased by one grade level. I am continuing to grow in my practice and working hard to develop as a teacher. I continue to grow in my practice and will work hard to develop as a teacher. I am committed to the growth of my students and myself. I aspire to make a difference in my students’ lives by motivating them and providing help to build their self-confidence, and to have a positive effect in other areas of their lives.

Students respond when they know their teachers are invested in their success. The KEEPS framework can guide novice teachers in building strong relationships with their students. These relationships can dramatically reduce the equity gap.

Joe Melendez’ Narrative

Joe Melendez is a Latino male who is a special education English language arts teacher in a high-needs middle school in Corona, Queens. He is more introspective about the impact education has had on his life and strives to understand how his experiences will impact the lives of his students. Joe fosters strong relationships with his predominantly low-income Latinx students and understands the challenges they face growing up in an economically depressed community, especially attending an underfunded school. He understands that building strong relationships with his students is critical, especially in light of the abrupt transition to remote learning brought on by COVID-19. Joe reflects:
Just as our students’ past experiences play a large role in how they learn and approach education, so do our past experiences affect who we are as educators. As such, I chose to become a Teaching Fellow because I wanted to be as meaningful to my students as my teachers were to me. I may have forgotten the names of most of the people I went to high school with, but I sincerely doubt I’ll ever forget Mr. Ferrigno or Mrs. Scully, both English teachers who went out of their way to teach more than basic literacy skills. I hope to be that kind of teacher students will remember positively whenever they think back to their time in school.

Joe’s experience with memorable teachers made him want to become that type of teacher for his own students. He recounts that these teachers did not merely teach the content, but that they went out of their way for him. Joe reflects on how he could do this in his own practice:

I was taught to use the knowledge I gained from my professors to better understand the challenges present in my classes, as well as the best practices to help my students. I was taught to use empathy to connect with my students and their community, as well as to engage in enquiry. By asking questions, I help my students attain the content knowledge, and their answers help me assess their needs. LIU’s emphasis on these values helps me recognize the pluralism of my school community and appreciate the level of social commitment required to advocate for my students. LIU’s KEEPS claims have shaped my practice and my identity as an educator.

The work of Paolo Freire resonates with Joe because he believes that learning is most effective when students’ lived experiences combine with their curiosity and interest in a subject to gain new knowledge. He reflects:

It is imperative that curriculum content and assignments be diverse enough to keep students interested, otherwise education can become more of an uphill battle than it needs to be. The overuse of terms like “rigor” does not reflect what it means to inspire students to fully engage in critical thinking and, ultimately, to really learn. In short, the difference is between students memorizing the answers to a test and forgetting them the second they get their scores back, and students retaining knowledge born out of legitimate engagement with a subject.

Joe realizes that taking content knowledge and pedagogy and turning it into his own praxis dictates that knowledge be diverse both in the source it stems from and in complexity. In other words, knowledge should not be spoon fed to students for rote memorization, but instead should be distilled from a variety of sources and viewpoints so that students can develop more complex thinking patterns to craft a truth that is most relevant to their culture and belief systems. Knowledge that does not come from diverse sources can quickly start to feel repetitive, irrelevant, and stagnant. Similarly, if an instructor fails to challenge students, or worse, manages to frustrate them, they will not engage with the subject. In short, an inadequate praxis becomes a barrier, rather than a vehicle, to new knowledge.

This mirrors Emdin’s (2011) “Five Cs” of education: cogenerative dialogue, co-teaching, cosmopolitan, context, and content. In his popular Ted Talk, Emdin explained that content is last of the five because without first applying the other four to build strong relationships, students will not learn. Joe draws from the work of Sapon-Shevin (2004) to dismantle the systemic oppression inherent in the curriculum and avoids “othering” marginalized groups in his classroom. He reflects:

My praxis determines how much content a student retains and which students can readily access knowledge, which in turn affects how the students view and treat themselves as well as each other. In essence, my pedagogical choices determine whether marginalized groups in my classroom continue to be “othered” and whether they have equitable access to the subject.

It is clear that best practices and inclusive praxis come from socially conscious pedagogy and from educators taking the time to truly do the work. Joe believes the KEEPS values helped develop his confidence so that he could design engaging lessons that honor his students’ diversity.
Teeyana Thomas’ Narrative

Teeyana Thomas grew up in a Caribbean household in a highly impoverished neighborhood. She sees teaching as a form of activism that enables her to tap into students’ cultural capital and instill in them the joy and value of education. Aspiring to be an educator who provides equitable education to all students despite broad structural inequalities, Teeyana uses her own experiences to help students realize that they do not need to subscribe to the ideas of the dominant culture or to see life’s difficulties as a setback. She helps students use their difficulties as motivation to accomplish their personal and academic goals. Teeyana believes the KEEPS claims exemplify the CR-SE standards and values that urban educators need to improve their students’ academic achievement of students and to make a difference in their personal lives. She reflects:

Knowledge is gained from courses in pre-service training, skill-building sessions, courses taken in our graduate program, and our experience in the classrooms. It is important for educators to understand what knowledge matters, whose knowledge matters, and how to ensure access for all students.

Teeyana’s stance is deeply rooted in Delpit’s work, in which the primary role of the teacher is to provide students’ access to the culture of power. Acknowledging that knowledge is multifaceted, Teeyana is committed to seek the answers to questions she may not understand, and in doing so embodies CR-SE principles by becoming an agent for change so that dominant structural barriers can be dismantled. Enquiry is essential to create change effectively within the education system, as it is the driving force behind refining pedagogical practices. It is through enquiry that educators are able to become agents of change, reflect on areas needed for improvement and growth, and to create platforms for advocacy.

Woven together, the KEEPS values provide the framework a new teacher can adopt to establish CR-SE practices in the classroom. These practices can extend beyond the classroom walls to effect changes in school policies and procedures, and in the broader community. Teeyana believes activism and empathy go hand in hand and are vital to building rapport with students to understand their concerns, cares, and interests. She also believes that urban educators must demonstrate pluralism as they teach multicultural students and tailor the course content to reflect their diverse cultures, thereby affirming their identities.

Empathy alone cannot solve all challenges. Teeyana combined knowledge, enquiry, pluralism, and social commitment to design a curriculum unit that included an action resource process. Drawing from Emdin’s reality pedagogy, she understood that a key to student engagement across content was to give the students a voice through discussion-based teaching. As a result, her students took ownership of their education while she learned what was relevant to them. As Teeyana’s students developed a voice in the classroom, it became clearer to her how to tailor the content to their interests and thereby increase their engagement. Teeyana sees her role as an educator who will inspire, empower, motivate, and support her students and their voices. She explains:

My goal as an educator is to understand, assess, and reflect on the curriculum I use with my multicultural students. I plan on creating an anti-racist curriculum that helps students to critically examine power relations in society and empowers them to challenge and change dominant beliefs in society.

Teeyana believes that KEEPS prepared her to adapt to changing variables in the school system and in her students’ lives. She employed a journaling technique that, consistent with Milner’s work (2007), helps teachers develop their students’ empathy by creating a safe space to address their socioemotional needs. She explains:

As a special educator, I have had to adjust techniques used to build relationships with students. Within the first week of remote learning instruction, I realized that new strategies would be needed to keep students engaged throughout the transition to remote learning, as students reported that they were feeling overwhelmed. I assign frequent journal prompts to help students engage in socioemotional learning. The journal tasks enlighten me as to how students are experiencing the pandemic by providing valuable insight into their physical and emotional well-being. The journals allow students to have a continuous space in which they can express and manage their emotions during these unprecedented times.
The KEEPS philosophy is evident in Teeyana’s practice through her content knowledge, co-inquiry with students, and overall empathy. These factors promote the strong bonds she has with her students, which in turn sustains the relationships that enabled her to guide students through the challenges of remote learning, build a community of learners through pluralism, and model social commitment and civic engagement.

**Conclusion**

The failure to properly educate our Black and Brown children is a national crisis. Closing the equity gap has been further complicated by the challenges brought on by COVID-19. Providing culturally relevant, sustaining education is a proven way to support our most vulnerable learners and help close the gap. LIU provides student educators with the means to operationalize best CR-SE practices. Helena’s reflection on her trauma and loss during her teenage years enabled her to recall the empathetic practices of the teachers who comforted and supported her. Empathy, along with knowledge and pluralism, helped her to get to know her students and to build an effective and inclusive classroom culture. Despite earning a low performance rating in her first year of teaching, Helena leveraged her strong relationships with students to become successful in the classroom.

Joe reflected on how the school system affected his life so that he could help his students navigate their own challenges. He emulates the teachers who made a positive difference in his life and hopes his students will remember him. He has come to realize that empathy builds relationships that are the key to engagement, deep learning, critical thinking, and retention of content knowledge. Joe insists that having diverse, culturally responsive classroom materials help teachers avoid “othering” students in a way that distances them from content knowledge.

Teeyana uses her experiences growing up in an immigrant family that was struggling financially to model goal-oriented motivation for her students. She embraces enquiry as a powerful tool for dismantling oppressive structures and creating platforms for students’ voices and advocacy. She believes that showing empathy and having a strong social commitment can help individual learners become strong members of a community and agents of change.

These KEEPS claims are universally applicable and they operationalize values that advance culturally responsive teaching. Engaging with the claims promotes the critical self-reflection needed to recognize bias, understand and embrace students' cultures and identities, and provide a welcoming classroom that caters to each student's unique learning needs. Practicing KEEPS in the classroom will enable teachers to build strong relationships with students and lead to their academic success.

**Endnotes**

1 See [www.schottfoundation.org/publications/Public_Education_and_Black_Male_Students.pdf](http://www.schottfoundation.org/publications/Public_Education_and_Black_Male_Students.pdf).

2 See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Y9VtV_8fjo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Y9VtV_8fjo).

**References**


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Black Girls Negotiating Code-Switching: The Importance of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the Classroom

Abstract

Literature that reflects and embraces the history and lived experiences of Black girls and women should be incorporated into school curricula. Implementing text and lessons about history and events of the lives of Black girls and women as well as books about and authored by Black women provides a space where Black adolescent girls can see reflections of themselves. This can help them to gain and maintain a solid sense of identity and belonging. Exposure to texts that reflect their lives can also illustrate for these girls that there is value in their lived experiences, including their linguistic and cultural code-switching. They can learn that their modes of expression and their perspectives are not disreputable but simply a part of their culture. Providing such a curriculum will pique these girls’ interest in academics and help them find their voice and agency in the academic setting, which will empower them to participate in the classroom discourse.

Keywords: adolescent, Black girls, code-switching, culturally relevant pedagogy

Introduction

The motivation to write this piece stems from my personal experience as a Black female student who was not provided space in the classroom to be culturally expressive. Although this happened many years ago, Black girls are still having experiences similar to mine. Thus, it is imperative to have this conversation, but not only in the Black community, as we are not the only people teaching our children. Schools must confirm for Black girls that their cultural norms are not substandard but part of the fabric of who they are, including their lived experiences, their perspectives, and their histories. These also should be an integral part of Black girls’ education.

The strong connection between culture and language has been a consistent thread throughout the history of the Black community. When enslaved people were brought to America, this legacy came with them, and it took root as a tenet of Black American culture. As these people attempted to build a functioning community, their songs created a system of coded communication that deepened their bond and also eluded the detection of slaveholders. Slave songs provided a way to arrange “shouts” and meetings, and even to share escape plans. The song lyrics also warned of “patty rollers” (patrollers), and often were sung as a way to offer one another support and encouragement to carry on (Ramey, 2008). The complexity of Black women’s work songs is acknowledged in the book, Put Your Hands on Your Hips and Act Like a Woman: Black History and Poetics in Performance (Jackson, 2020). Songs sung by enslaved women as they did their backbreaking work fostered a collaborative environment that could be interpreted as an act of rebellion and resistance (Jackson, 2020). The history of these songs has become part of the narratives of later generations, which encourages Black girls to create their own forms of expression in the current context of life.

The relationship between language and culture and the variations within different ethnic groups have always been of major interest to me. Exploring how the dominant white society perceives Black ethnic groups based on their linguistic and cultural norms has been central to my personal and professional experiences, curiosity, and observations. Growing up as a Black woman in the United States has enabled me to be an active participant in various cultural communities where code-switching is a constant, even as the language spoken differs. The linguistic-cultural dance...
of code-switching has always been normal for me. When with the Black community, I switch from Standard English to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and embrace its spirited rhythm. This switching has been an effortless and natural process in my life, and my fluency is an exercise of power and liberation that has made me aware of the connection between language, culture, and power.

AAVE embodies a rhythmic flow of expression that is a joyous and natural form of group identity. The tongue of the Black community creates a safe, familiar space that is only for us, where outsiders cannot change or dismantle our aesthetic cocoon. It is ours, as reflected in our speech, music, dance, and other forms of expressions such as dress. For some this dialect has a protective factor, and they do not speak it in front of members of outside communities. It is part of a unique mask they wear, and it shields them from the critique of not speaking and articulating ideas in a form that White people often do not embrace or even acknowledge. Many in the Black community believe that the white community views our linguistic distinctiveness only as a bastardization of English and our gestures as inferior pantomimes designed to amuse and entertain. This is the duality of being Black in America.

**Girls Who Look Like Me**

Seriously focusing on how Black adolescent girls are viewed by white educators is for me a visceral experience. When I hear a Black girl attempt to express herself, I often think of the personal experiences I had in my youth. During my adolescence, I comfortably spoke Standard English, but my cultural perspectives made it uncomfortable to speak out during classroom exchanges. Even though I code-switched fluidly and with ease, there were countless times when my perspectives and experiences alienated me from my white counterparts, and my cultural identity seemed obsolete. My classmates and I read the same texts, but the words had different cultural connotations for me. I see Black female adolescent students facing this same dilemma today.

In one of my middle school English classes, we read a short story in which the main character was Black. At the end of the story, this character made a decision that was not intimated in the plot and our teacher encouraged us to guess what it was. My white classmates eagerly raised their hands, but all gave erroneous answers. To me, however, reading the story through a different lens than my peers, the main character's choice was obvious. I understood the familiar and relatable thought process of this character, who was Black like me, but I was uncomfortable sharing my answer because I was certain that my classmates and my teacher would not understand. Explaining my response would have been arduous, as no others in the classroom shared my Black cultural perspective. I knew that I should use Standard English in class and enjoy my linguistic group identity only when with my Black peers, but I still lacked the confidence to share my cultural perspective in class. I had a feeling of otherness and discomfort, that I had no agency and no voice. Although this occurred many years ago, these feelings are still prevalent when I am in academic settings; I often recall such experiences when I am among my educator colleagues and with Black adolescent female students.

As I moved into young adulthood and developed a self-assured cultural identity, I began to feel grounded and whole. This enabled me to question my understanding of the connection between Black culture and language in American society and to fully embrace my belief that code-switching is an asset that I should not hide or apologize for. When among members of the Black community, I still marvel at my unconscious fluidity of language and culture. Moving from one sphere to the other is a major part of my identity.

**My Insider Observer Lens**

When I became an educator 20 years ago, I added the observer’s lens to my insider’s lens on Blackness. I often observed how my colleagues scrutinized Black students and that teachers showed little respect for or acknowledgment of these students’ cultural norms. Black students often were treated as though they were in dire need of cultural remediation. My colleagues questioned why Black students were not familiar with the vocabulary, vernacular, and experiences of the mainstream white culture. These questions seemed to be anchored in the belief that white American culture
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is superior (Kohli, 2014). Teachers who treated Black students this way did not even attempt to understand the variations in language and culture or the lived experiences of these Black students, nor did they realize the impact their critical attitude had on them.

I also noticed how often teachers misjudged Black girls when they expressed themselves candidly in a linguistic and cultural format they found comfortable and authentic. The assessment rubrics for many Black girls were judgmental, relentless, and harsh, and they were addressed as if they had no right to their own girlhood experiences. Teachers often perceived the assertiveness in these young Black women's speech or mannerisms as classless, belligerent, or unruly, which often caused these girls to be cheated out of their authentic development into womanhood through the interrogation of self. These girls' attempts to communicate their points of view often were misunderstood or unacknowledged, and some teachers perceived the girls as unintelligent and incapable of participating astutely in conversations (Morris, 2016).

I have observed that, in addition to progressing through the traditional adolescent stages, Black girls must confront the intersectionality of race and gender-based discrimination in society (Crenshaw, 2017). They often are told to speak "proper" English and to discard other forms of expression, as though linguistic expression is a prescribed science rather than a distinct community characteristic. I make the distinction between "proper" and "standard," which are not synonymous, as the former merely refers to the way the dominant culture speaks (Baker-Bell, 2020). Teachers dismissing Black girls' standard ways of speaking often leaves these students feeling devalued and disengaged from the classroom discourse (Baker-Bell, 2020). I sometimes wonder why it matters if these girls do not demonstrate the ability to speak Standard English. This does not necessarily indicate that they can't contribute to the classroom discourse or that they do not have valuable insights and opinions. Moreover, at times they may intentionally not switch to Standard English because they need to emphasize a point in the vernacular that best suits their position (Baker-Bell, 2020). My conversations with colleagues suggest that Black adolescent girls are often deemed academically and intellectually deficient when they do not participate in classroom discussions or conform to the mainstream forms of expression.

Why I Do This Work

My concern as an educator is that many Black adolescent girls may be voiceless in the classroom because teachers shame their language and speech patterns. I strongly believe that the classroom should be a place with a sense of community and mutual respect. Black girls' lived experiences and chosen forms of speech should not be seen as negative or be treated with disapproval by educators and fellow students who are not Black. Where this is happening, Black girls may find themselves engaged in a constant battle to define their lives in the face of falsehoods and narratives that depict their lives in inaccurate or incomplete ways. This is why encouraging Black girls to form a positive self-identity should be a staple in learning settings, and educators should be prepared to make this part of their classroom instruction (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016).

Black girls often have shared their experiences and feelings with me about how they are perceived in school. One student recently said that she longed to read literature in class that was reflective of her life. She would like to read more books where the main characters are Black women and more books authored by Black women. She expressed feeling invisible in her English class because she felt so disconnected from the classroom literature. Black girls deeply desire a feeling of connectedness in the classroom, but such spaces are not often provided (Price-Dennis et al., 2017).

My observations have led me to consider possible solutions that could help to minimize these Black girls' feelings of otherness and invisibility and instead elevate and strengthen these adolescent Black girls' position in the academic setting.

Proposed Solutions for Black Girls' Space in the Classroom

Providing supportive spaces in which adolescent Black girls can articulate and express their thoughts and perspectives in classroom discourse is vital for their educational growth (Muhammad...
I believe this can be actualized comprehensively and effectively if adolescent Black girls are able to hear and see themselves in the classroom literature.

First, teacher pre-service courses should include curricula that provide strategies for approaching Black girls’ cultural and linguistic code-switching pedagogically. Second, culturally relevant literature should be an established component of the curricula. Literature that reflects the life experiences, language, cultural expressions, and perspectives of Black women could help Black adolescent girls develop and maintain a secure sense of identity. This is especially true at the middle school level, when adolescent girls are at a juncture where they are claiming a self-identity. These girls need to read about Black women and learn about the current events in their community that will influence and affect them. They need to engage with texts authored by Black adolescent girls and women so that they can make connections and receive affirmation that their cultural norms are not inferior. They need to be exposed to literature that presents the world unapologetically from the perspective of Black females. Third, space must be provided where these girls can openly discuss their perspectives on current events and their lived experiences, including their anguish, triumphs, and questions.

Another way to affirm Black adolescent girls in the classroom is to address historic events that involve Black women, which often are omitted or misinterpreted. For example, discussions of slavery rarely address the lynching of Black women, even though 15 states documented lynchings of Black women between 1886 and 1957 (DeLongoria, 2006). Black women’s involvement in key historic events must also be presented accurately. For example, Rosa Park is often portrayed as a docile commuter who happened to speak up one day, but in fact, she was highly active during the 1960s civil rights movement (Gilbert, 2018). The female organizers of the recent Black Lives Matter movement are at times vilified and depicted as a troubled young hate group instead of as organizers and agents of change (Bandele & Cullors, 2018). These distorted views of Black women remain prevalent in 2022.

I generally see the same Black women being discussed in the schools a few times during the school year, particularly during Black History Month. In fact, there is a plethora of Black women who have made significant contributions to our society, and the brief mention devalues their impact, influence, and accomplishments. Moreover, this very limited portrayal of Black women’s contributions clandestinely implies that only a handful of exceptional Black women are an important part of the American cultural and historical experience. I fear that this sends a message to Black girls that the Black woman’s legacy in America is inconsequential. A more holistic and varied integration of Black women’s important role in our global society is urgently needed. Educational settings should provide such information and simultaneously serve as an antidote for societal ills like racism and sexism. Black adolescent female students should be taught to be open-minded, critical thinkers with a sense of their honorable place in society. Most importantly, these students should learn about their history and their culture, just as they learn about the history and culture of the dominant, mainstream experience.

I sometimes find that my colleagues’ lack of interest in the lived experiences of their Black students goes hand in hand with the lack of knowledge and inaccurate information about Black women. Teachers have a responsibility to be appropriately informed and to provide a well-rounded, balanced learning environment that offers information that is not tainted by stereotypes and benightedness.

**Conclusion**

Black adolescent girls need to know that they are viable, valuable citizens, that they do matter, and that people are interested in their lives. Educators need to remind these girls that they not only have a history but that the events and experiences of their lives, their music, language, and lifestyles, are making history for future generations. Black girls need to know that they contribute to history and that what they do in life will have an impact and leave a legacy.
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Black Women Leaders: Sociopolitical Identity Development as a Pathway to Success

Dina C. Skeffrey

Abstract

Although they have poked a few holes in the “concrete ceiling” that represents the barrier to Black women’s entrance into influential jobs, Black women are still underrepresented in leadership roles in society. This commentary, which is offered through the lens of a Black woman in business leadership and higher education investigates ways to improve the educational achievement of young Black women, and to put them on a pathway to a lifetime of success in their post-college trajectory. Research asserts that resources are available to support the success of Black women and enable them to achieve influential roles in which they excel. This journey begins with school-age girls, specifically with their educational trajectory, which should provide teaching that models and exemplifies cultural acceptance. Exposing the inequality Black females experience in the school system enables opportunities for discussion and innovative techniques to emerge. However, this requires first acknowledging and celebrating Black girls as producers of knowledge in a socially stratified education system.

Keywords: Black women, diversity, communities of learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, sociopolitical identity

Mama Said There’d Be Days Like This

My perspective on learning, viewed through the lens of a Black woman, differed from that of many of my White classmates. Just like teaching, learning as a Black woman was not for the fainthearted. I was forced to develop my sociopolitical identity in the context of a country whose systems are not designed to support me or allow my personal and professional aspirations to flourish. My parents told me that, in order to have a shot at success in this world, I would have to work exponentially harder than the person next to me in school, in sporting events, and in community workshops. My parents had identified the social barriers that would impede my advancement, even at a young age: gender and racial stereotyping, and tokenism. They were deliberate and tactical in their approach to helping me develop a critical analytical lens so I could face the inevitable inequitable social and political strife I would encounter in my life.

Gender and Racial Stereotyping of Black Girls in School

Many assumptions made about Black girls in K-12 schooling have led to their marginalization. From the perspective of what has come to be known as reproduction theory, schools not only serve as sites for the construction of race, class, and gender identities, but they also reproduce existing inequalities in these areas (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Collins (1990) describes how intersectionality combines race, class, and gender into a mode of inequality intended to alienate and discriminate. Although Black girls inhabit a unique place in the education system, instead of being celebrated they often are stereotyped and demeaned. According to Morris (2007), Black girls in schools are told to act like ladies, but then are often called coarse and overly assertive and labeled as “loudies” (p. 491). Grant’s (1994) examination of the intersections of race and gender that Black girls encounter in the classrooms demonstrates that teachers tend to treat Black girls differently than they treat White girls or Black boys. According to Epstein et al. (2017), Black girls are seen as less innocent, which renders them more vulnerable to harsh treatment. Epstein et al. also purport that Black girls are not supported, protected, or nurtured at school because they are seen as independent, and therefore are not allowed to partake of the opportunities and advantages others enjoy. Disheartening and most perplexing is the current rise in out-of-school...
suspensions Black girls are experiencing, along with their increased entry into the juvenile detention and prison systems (Pratt-Clark, 2010).

I remember inquiring about getting extra help when I was struggling with my ninth-grade sequential math course and being told that I didn’t need help. Although there were a few Black students in the class, the classmates I observed in the extra help class were White. Moreover, only the White students sought to answer questions in class; the Black students who offered to answer were seldom acknowledged and the teacher responded to them in a manner that would make an animal run away. That was my experience with the mathematics department in my school district, whose employees resembled the majority of students—they were White. The math teacher’s responses were tactless and nonchalant, along with an attitude that suggested, “Why, don’t you know this?”

My parents raised me to express myself, so I questioned the teachers’ attitudes, which led to sighs of exasperation and threats of detention. Fortunately, my parents demanded that I receive extra help and that I be treated with respect and sensitivity. My parents never hesitated to call a meeting with the teachers, principal, or superintendent to stand up for my educational rights. According to Walker et al. (2005), many Black parents are aware that their children are systemically maltreated in school, so they intentionally engage with the school personnel and work to cultivate a supportive learning environment. According to St. Mary et al. (2018), the teacher’s role is pivotal in creating a learning environment that will foster all students’ talents and provide positive experiences. To this day, mathematics is not my strong suit, even though I am a business professional, and my disdain for the subject is the result of my early experiences. While I was fortunate to be raised by parents who advocated for me in school, many Black girls do not share my experience, which is why I am an advocate for research in this area.

Exposure to Success at an Early Age

According to Hughes (1988, p. 65), “Minoritized women students have the most limited access to ethnic role models and mentors like themselves.” This results in Black girls having to navigate the development of their professional and sociopolitical identities independently, especially if they aim to serve in executive roles when they are older. Black girls need to see influential Black women who serve in roles that are antithetical to gender stereotypes and who mirror success in a great variety of professions, such as business, science, and politics. According to Bage and Martinot (2011), it is important to expose young girls to female role models to encourage them to aspire to high-status positions, where at present they are greatly underrepresented and negatively stereotyped. Aspiring to achieve success begins by being exposed to a variety of places, professions, and people. According to Carter Andrews et al. (2019), conversation spaces such as “sister circles” are critical to Black women developing kinship and community.

Unlike many young Black girls, I was fortunate that my parents exposed me to mentors and organizations throughout my youth, such as the American Red Cross, where I was an HIV/AIDS peer educator. I was also a member of the Nassau County Youth Board, several athletic associations, and an entrepreneur group where I networked with professionals of color whose personal and professional goals mirrored mine. My parents’ goal was to help me cultivate a sense of social and political responsibility, as well as a strong sense of identity. My parents’ support, coupled with that of a wide range of organizations, such as youth boards, sports teams, human relation groups, and Black educator committees fostered my growth, widened my sociopolitical lens, and enhanced my belief that I could attain leadership roles.

Transitioning from K-12 to College

Even as systemic and institutional racism persists, young Black girls’ transition from K-12 to college is cause for celebration. According to Arnett (2019), Gloria Ladson-Billings reminds Black girls to “remember who they are and understand their place on campus, and maximize opportunities” (p. 1). The strongest influence on young Black girls usually comes from outside their institution, where their impact is visible in the community. According to Jones (2021), affinity spaces for Black females have supported their development, healing, and resilience.
In my experience as a young Black woman, my preparation for college was synonymous to preparing for war, and I had assembled an arsenal of tools. The most essential tools during those years were the technology courses that had taught me to compete with the best and most innovative; affinity spaces where I encountered like-minded pre- and post-collegiate Black and Brown girls who supported me and offered words of affirmation; and, finally, the fellowships I experienced alongside professionals who looked like me and offered me guidance so I could maximize my potential.

While the recent increase in the number of events centered on supporting Black and Brown communities is important, I believe the more important key to success is having mentors who mirror young Black girls, support their endeavors, hold them accountable to being their best selves, and remain steadfast in their commitment. As Ladson-Billings (1994) reminds us, the learning process must include the experiences and culture of the students it is serving.

**Transitioning from College to the Professional Sphere**

In the transition from college to the professional sphere, it is critical to embrace one's visibility as a professional and as an expert in one's field. In an interview conducted by Lomboy (2020), Pamela Carlton and Alexis Smith offered five actions that lead to success: (1) maintaining resilience in the face of challenge, (2) building social capital and crafting conscious relationships, (3) taking risks and embracing all opportunities, (4) breaking barriers and developing confidence, and (5) staying true to your values in the face of adversity.1

As a Black woman whose trajectory led her to the height of corporate America and higher education, I frequently had to readjust my lens in the presence of those who were intimidated by my golden-brown melanin and surprised by my ability to articulate. This need to readjust increased my fervor to build communities that would encourage, lead, and mentor Black and Brown women in ways that taught them how to conquer the world, using the arsenal of tools I had used.

After I left corporate America and continued in higher education, I noticed only a small number of Black women in my business courses who were dedicated to graduating with their master's in business administration. As an entrepreneur, I acted on that observation by transitioning the focus of my existing company, which centered on business development, to focus instead on the professional development, leadership goals, and mentoring of young Black women. My company seeks to give a voice to the voiceless and encourage the historically invisible to shine in all facets of life. At my company, which centers its practices on teaching, mentorship, and storytelling, we actively revitalize the hearts of Black women.

**Where Do We Go from Here?**

The challenges of life pre- and post-college do not occur in a vacuum, as they include the persistent issues of stereotyping, discrimination, and marginalization. There is no clear roadmap to success for young Black women, and there is still a lack of Black women leaders in the boardroom, much less around the executive table. Therefore, it is essential that I and others like me teach young Black women how to develop their sociopolitical identities, challenge the status quo, channel their potential, and create their own seats at the leadership table.

As failure is now viewed as an institutional problem (Smith, 2000) rather than an individual student or racialized problem, many schools are diversifying their pedagogical approaches. According to Delpit (2012), when course readings and activities do not support culturally relevant learning, educators must proactively refresh the curricular materials and create conversations that enable diverse voices to be heard and supported in the classroom. Strategies to achieve this include diversifying the teaching workforce by employing teachers of color and revamping the curricula across disciplines to include culturally responsive content, pedagogy, and community building. It has been imperative throughout history to create and sustain wide-ranging learning communities. According to Hurtado et al. (2012), learning communities provide an opportunity for growth through networking, difficult conversations, and embraced practices to help each other out. I believe these communities must include mentoring relationships that enable margin-
alized children to see themselves represented, and to see possibilities for themselves across the leadership sector.

Improving young Black women’s access to opportunities and leaders and to success throughout their school years will require changes in the curriculum and in the way teachers think. Above all, the curriculum should include culturally responsive teaching that reflects the identities of all cultures. It also should incorporate contextual learning, a library of culture and community and relationship-building between teacher and student. As this more responsive mode of teaching is implemented, it must include strategies to clear the roadway to success and leadership for Black women. According to Haussler and Hoffman (2002, cited by Baker, 2013), these strategies should include real-world experiences that are of interest to the students, students’ participation in the development of rubrics to assess their learning, and classroom interactions that value the students’ points of view. To be successful, the teacher must employ materials that enable all students to participate and allow time for hands-on inquiry (Baker, 2013).

Having knowledge of and insight into students’ diverse learning styles and cultures will help teachers develop strong bonds with their students and give them further insight into how to develop a culturally rich curriculum. Although reform-based strategies are not a panacea, they can encourage sociopolitical reflection and help students build leadership skills, and they can enable young Black girls to envision themselves in leadership roles. If Black girls are to understand why they must strive for leadership roles, they must first understand the current plight of the Black woman. This is where the history and the lived experiences of Black women must be heard and delved into.

Ladson-Billings (1994) argues that oral narrative has become an important force in the lives of African American women as they unmask the social injustice that is present in their lives. America’s history is tarnished by a litany of violence against Black women, who have endured enslavement, rape by their slave masters, despair, humiliation, and desecration. The emergence of Black female leaders in the United States represents a history of struggle for liberation, of overcoming overwhelming oppression to “lift” the Black community out of racial, economic, and educational subjugation (Hanson, 2003). Black women leaders are not spared the prejudice associated with their race and gender, but changes in the education system have enabled them to be sufficiently empowered to rise and create a community of Black women leaders (Reed, 2012). Black women banding together around their sociopolitical power is a way for them to build real power, and their civic engagement promotes their feelings of belongingness. This emerging identity of having sociopolitical power is another vehicle for dismantling oppression, disrupting injustice and inequity, and uniting around Black women leaders.

According to Baker (2013), instructional strategies that focus on the student rather than on the teacher have helped to narrow the achievement gap as it relates to intersectionality. Instruction and activities that foster purposeful understanding of culture and engagement help to improve student achievement and provide the opportunity for Black girls to have voice and agency in their own education. Being listened to provides a way for these girls to deconstruct stereotypes and transform inequitable conditions while developing their sociopolitical identities. This shift to Black female students having a voice and representation in the curriculum, engaging with their communities, and promoting real-life action strategies is key to creating a future in which Black women leaders will thrive.

As diversity initiatives increase in the corporate sector and in academia, it is imperative that they center on a vision of future leaders. As long as Black girls remain marginalized, measures must be taken to alter the learning environment so that it incorporates every facet of students’ lives—culturally, emotionally, historically, socially, and politically. Black girls must be taught to think critically about social and political change, and to recognize that they are not failing the system but that the system is failing them. As Black girls and women continue to unite to increase the salience of their voices and their representation in society and in leadership roles, Black women must remain steadfast in our commitment to deconstructing perceptions that plague them in school as well as in their work. We must continue to cultivate and support the aforementioned initiatives to encourage, embolden, and empower Black girls as they pursue a pathway to having influential leadership roles.
As a Black woman and current doctoral student who has been told to be silent in my professional career, I know the time to show up is now. Black girls must see more Black women as senators, judges, physicians, lawyers, and teachers. Young Black girls must be informed in ways that encourage them to aspire to leadership roles and create their own seats at the table.

**Endnotes**

1 Pamela Carlton is president of Springboard, a consulting firm that assesses organizations for inclusive culture. Alexis Smith is an associate professor at Spears School of Business at Oklahoma State University, whose research spans workplace issues such as gender, diversity, bias, and discrimination.

**References**


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CONVERSATIONS IN URBAN EDUCATION
“I Don’t Know If the Plane Has Really Landed”: Flanbwayan Members on the Challenges, Omissions, and Potential of Culturally Responsive, Sustaining Education in NYC Public Schools

Abstract
This interview centers the voices of four Black women of immigrant origin, all of them members of the Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project, a community-based organization formed 15 years ago in New York City to promote cultural pride and biliteracy in newcomer youth. In this paper, two administrators and two youth participants are in conversation with each other as they reflect on their cross-generational experiences with culturally responsive and sustaining education in schools, share models of welcoming and culturally sustaining school cultures, and offer advice to educators on the types of dispositions and knowledge required to implement this education model with fidelity. They share the particular challenges they experienced as emergent bilingual students in their online learning classes, their concerns for the remainder of the year, and their hopes for the future.

Keywords: immigrant students, community-based organization, Haitian, emergent bilingual students, culturally responsive education

Introduction
New York City is a place of astounding human diversity, where one can dine on a host of international cuisines; hear, see, and speak languages from nearly every linguistic family; and find community organizations that are key to fostering belonging and supporting young people in navigating this space. The Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project is one of these organizations that is most effective at building bridges, advocating for social change, and empowering youth to seize the day and have their voices heard. As a community organization that partners with a range of schools, school agencies, and other groups, Flanbwayan has a unique view into the education landscape in New York City, both within and beyond its public schools. In the 2020-2021 school year, the student population was 16% Asian, 25% Black, 40% Hispanic, 3% Multiracial, and 15% White. Twelve percent were classified as English language learners (to whom I refer emergent bilingual), and 20% were classified as students with disabilities (New York City Department of Education, n.d.).

The city’s diversity has been an asset and a source of tension in the schools, where no one ethno-racial group has a majority and the diversity within panethnic and racial groups is often unrecognized. Community-based education groups like Flanbwayan and its members can offer educators much-needed insights into how to actualize a culturally responsive and sustaining education (CRSE) framework most effectively. The CRSE framework’s four grounding principles are “(1) welcoming and affirming environment, (2) high expectations and rigorous instruction, (3) inclusive curriculum and assessment, and (4) ongoing professional learning”.

In an interview conducted on Zoom in June 2021, Flanbwayan members shared how these principles manifested, or did not, in their experiences as students and in their professional roles as youth advocates. They also envisioned what an ideal school environment looks and feels like when embracing the CRSE framework and why creating such an environment is vital to student success.
JAVONTÉ BOSTICE, 12TH GRADE
The following interview is a verbatim conversation, which is integral to highlighting the linguistic variation within communities and trains the listener to expand their repertoire. Edits have been made only when absolutely necessary to eliminate ambiguity. Participants’ real names are used with permission.

**Interviewer:** So, thank you all for joining me this afternoon. I’m really, really looking forward to this conversation . . . So, I want you to tell me your name, your role in the organization, your grade, and also what motivated you to get involved.

**Kelitha:** Okay. I’m going to start. My name is Kelitha Nazaire. I’m a junior student. I am an outreach coordinator at Flanbwayan. My motivation is that Flanbwayan is like a big organization. They, like, give you opportunities as young women to share your thoughts and to also present your, like, qualifications. It’s been three years, and I am happy to join Flanbwayan.

**Stafy:** My name is Stafy Jean-Louis. I’m a junior in high school, at James Madison High School. I’ve been part of Flanbwayan for three years, too. I’m a member who takes part in activities at Flanbwayan such as dance group, girls’ group. And what motivated me to apply was that I could get help regarding school stuff, and I really wanted to join the dance group. So yeah, that’s what got me to be involved at Flanbwayan.

**Nancie:** I’m Nancie Adolphe. I’m the campaign manager at Flanbwayan. This is about my fifth year working at Flanbwayan. My reason for joining Flanbwayan is to be able to help students like myself when I came to this country. I also have the same similar background as the students. I was here, came from Haiti, went to high school here, and went to college here. So, I felt like when I was in high school, throughout my high school years, I had a lot of support from my school, especially from my surroundings. So, I think it’s important for students, especially students in high school, to have those support, to be able to navigate, um, the high school system here, as well as just navigate life, especially as a new immigrant, someone new to this country. So, that’s really my motivation for working at Flanbwayan, and to be able to be a voice for the students.

**Darnell:** Hi, I’m Darnell Benoit, the founder and director of Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project, and actually we’re celebrating 15 years. I’ve been a part of this for 15 years. It’s like another baby, another child. But, just like Nancie, just like the students we work with in the community we work in, where I represent that population of students, I came here also in high school, then no English, felt a bit isolated where I grew up in Queens, and there wasn’t anything . . . um, there wasn’t anything like Flanbwayan in my community. And then also Kahdeidra, you’re talking to like three different generations of Haitians, Haitian women here, which is great. I mean, I just turned 50, Nancie is in her thirties, and the girls are teens, 16 I think. So, you see the difference. When I came here in the eighties, there wasn’t anything at all. So, I think that’s why when I founded Flanbwayan, I thought of those ideas of what I had gone through as a teenager myself, not having the support in the community and in school, but having it at home and thinking about the students who don’t have it at home and who don’t have it in the school. How can a community organization really bridge that gap and connect? And that’s exactly why I founded the organization in my community, so Haitian youth can connect with each other and connect to their community.

**Interviewer:** Thank you. Thank you all. I mean, I clearly, I hear your passion for the organization. So, um, this kind of leads to our second question. What’s the most rewarding part of your involvement in this organization? So, what brings you the most joy in the work that you’re doing? What makes you feel the most proud to be involved in this organization?

**Darnell:** For me, [inaudible] for me, it’s an immigrant-serving organization, it’s led by immigrants, and it’s a space that not only young people but the community can come to feel welcomed. Somebody speaks your language; people understand your culture. That’s so important today to have that, and when young people and their parents, when they walk into the organization, that they feel like home, that they can get answers to their questions. We all know that being a public school parent is not easy. Being a public school student is not easy. When all these challenges, you know, come up, then the community, parents, and students, they have a space to go to, to find answers and solutions.
Nancie: I think for me, um, some of the things that makes me happy to be at work is to see, um, like the student success. To see, you know, students, especially like you see how you were talking about your daughter, like, I’m sure Darnell remembers from when she first came and to see her now in college, to see the young woman that she has become. And I think for me, to me, that’s the thing that I like to see. And knowing, you know, when the students first came here to see the growth in the students. That’s, for me, it’s very rewarding when I see that, and I see students, like even, you know, having Stafy and Kelitha in here. I remember I recruited them to come to Flanbwayan, so you will see why, you know, I’m happy to do the work that I’m doing.

Kelitha: The most rewarding part of my work is like, I appreciate how Flanbwayan opened the doors for me as young Haitian immigrants to come here, to not speak English as well, and to like feel comfortable to have like a space to share your thoughts, like share your ideas with others, and how, as a young Haitian woman, I can entertain other young Haitians to come participate, to like civil activities that we have, to make them feel comfortable, to make them feel like they have support in the U.S.

Stafy: For me, the most rewarding part will actually be the bond that we all share since we all come from like similar backgrounds, and we have similar experiences. Um, I feel a certain sense of like peace to know that, “Oh, she’s just like me. He’s just like me.” And we all just became friends, and I really just enjoy the bond that we share.

Interviewer: And so, what I want you to do now is, I want you to just think back to if you remember your school doing anything to celebrate your ethnic or cultural background, if there’s any particular memory that stands out to you. [Or], is there anything that your school is currently doing? Is there anything that your school is doing to celebrate your ethnic background, celebrate being Haitian or to celebrate being Caribbean?

Darnell: For me, who grew up here in the eighties, nothing whatsoever . . . I didn't miss much because my parents, my father had done a great job of that. So, coming in here in America, in the United States, like my own history, my own identity as a young Haitian woman, that was clear for me, of who I was and the history of my country. That was clear, but I didn't get the culture here. ... Growing up in the eighties, there was a lot of, um, if you were Haitian, sometimes it was, students were afraid to say they were Haitian because there was a lot of bullying of Haitians back in the eighties in the schools. And then there was the HIV and AIDS situation, all that compiled with everything, so it was really, really hard to be Haitian, a Haitian student back in the eighties . . . but the school didn't celebrate anyone, even though we were all Black and Brown from different parts of the Caribbean. There wasn't any celebration. . . . Even with all the bullying that the Haitian students were going through, because there was a big Haitian population, there was a big Jamaican, a big Trinidadian, and different Caribbean, like Guyanese and so forth. The school never did anything to really support the students, to really help us learn about each other. So, none of that happened for us, for me anyway.

Kelitha: Yeah. For me now, that goes to like [a] Black school, I don't see anything that is like matter really to my ethnicity. No parties, no celebrations, nothing. Nothing. I go to Clara Barton, Clara Barton High School. The only thing I’m gonna say like they did, is just like, um, when it's in March, like to inspire Black people, you can see like posters. They trying to fly posters, or they can have the student go to the auditorium having poem and stuff, but it's not really something that you see that as a Black woman, that you find yourself, like, it's like something that we celebrate as Black women that we need to be proud. I can say like, it's very low. Like some students trying to just like, all the . . . since we have to celebrate, like, because it's Black month history, but it's not really matter to them.

Stafy: For me, I go to a majority White school, but every single year we have, like, one day or one week where students could choose to make slides about, like, the country that they come from, share about, like, their food and their traditions. And I think it's a really good idea, but when no one pay attention to the slides, because it's just like on a screen, um, like on the side. So, no one really pays attention to it. So, I don't really know if that's really honoring because we make the slides, but not everyone pay attention to it. But yeah, my school has like a special day just for everybody to just
talk about like their ethnicity. It’s every year. I think it’s a week. Like, they just put the slides up for a week. Like you do the slides, and they put it up on a screen that when you come into the school, you can see the screen.

**Nancie:** For me, I went to Brooklyn International High School. So, my school was, it’s part of—it’s the schools that they specialize in students who are immigrant students. So, throughout our school, our cultural background or ethnicity is very, it’s celebrated. … When I was there, we didn’t have that many Black or Brown teachers, but the school had a lot of things that could help us where I think some of the teachers either would speak another language. … We have different activities throughout the year. We would have, um, feasts where people would share their ethnic food. We also had a big cultural festival where we all, everybody can show talent from their home country. So, it was celebrated. We all, we have, um, different clubs like Haitian club, Bengali club, Chinese club. So . . . our culture and our ethnicity background was celebrated a lot in my school ‘cause that was the specialty of our school.

**Interviewer:** Thank you. thank you all for sharing. … So, um, in this issue . . . the focus is on what we call culturally responsive and sustaining education, or CRSE, for the acronym. And it’s defined as “centering, elevating, uplifting, and sustaining the lives, cultures, and communities of all students.” That’s how we define culturally responsive and sustaining education. It is education centered on “liberation and emancipation from the systemic ableist, racist, classist, patriarchal structures of White supremacy.” So, what, if anything, do you know about the Department of Education’s (DOE) effort to promote culturally responsive and sustaining education in schools? Do you know anything about their efforts to do that?

**Darnell:** Yeah, for me, I know the efforts to promoting that, but I don’t know if the plane has really landed in terms of, um, schools respecting and doing their best to connect the curriculum, to connect the students to that, the CRSE. I think it’s something that’s super important for the DOE to have decided to do, but with so many schools and so many different groups of students, I’m not sure that it has started. I’m not sure that schools are respecting it, and I’m not sure if students are getting it. From what I hear, I don’t think so.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So now my question is, um, what are the main challenges . . . you see to implementing CRSE in school? What are the challenges that you think, that you hear people are facing, or that you think may possibly be happening or why, you know, in Darnell’s words, that “the plane hasn’t really landed”? I love that metaphor.

**Darnell:** [Laughing] I know. Yeah, the challenges. The challenges are many. It’s about changing our minds. It’s about the system, right, changing, changing, and changing in many ways. … I’d like to know, does each school have a plan? Have they had the training? Have they understood exactly, you know, what’s going on? Do they know the population of students they work with? Because, because it is the public school, because it is 1.1 million students, and because there is such diversity in the school . . . I’m curious, like, you know, schools have to get to know their communities. Okay, so if you have a community of Yemeni kids, then it’s going to be your curriculum, and what you do with CRSE should be different than what a school is doing in East New York [Brooklyn] with a majority Black American, uh, African American kids. So, I think all that has to be dealt with, and I think it’s difficult.

**Interviewer:** So what’s important for teachers and principals and vice principals and everybody who works in the school with students, what do you think is important for them to know when they’re planning their lessons? If they want to be—plan lessons that are culturally relevant and sustaining and that uplift your cultures, do you have any advice for them?

**Kelitha:** My advice is, I want them to be, like, more patient with immigrant kids. And also I want like for some teachers to like avoid stereotyping. And what I want, I want also teachers to be like trying to be more resourceful with students.

**Interviewer:** Hmm. Okay. Those are great. Kelitha, wait, I want—talk to us more about that. Can you explain more about what you mean by being more patient and also being more resourceful?
Kelitha: Okay. When I say being more patient, it's like some teachers, when you come here as an immigrant, you don't speak English, like a language barrier, it's like for them, it's not the same thing. They only teaching you what they only have to say, but it's like, as an immigrant student, I don't want to feel myself, like, left behind. I want the teacher to be, like, more patient with me, go over the stuff like multiple time until I get it. Because once you feel like you left behind, you will not be able to, like, focus in what the teacher said. You'll be feeling, like, isolated. And when I said resourceful, is like, even as a teacher, you don't speak English, you don't speak Kreyòl or French, I think they can try to, like, make research. Like use nonverbal communications for me as an immigrant student to know what the teacher is saying.

Stafy: Um, I definitely agree with Kelitha on patience because I was the perfect example. When I first came here, I did not know English, and they just put me in a normal class where we didn't have dual language, [a] dual language program where we have it only in seventh and eighth grade. So, I think it's very important for the school to know that not everybody will, like, be able to fully understand if they don't have, like, the resources that they need. And also I feel like they should be able to learn about the students and include, like, their cultural background in school. For example, like English, you could give books about the students' background. And I think this would just make, like, education more entertaining for students in general.

Darnell: Training is important for the teachers, for the school, for everyone, I mean, to be a team, to have like a school team where everyone is coming together, coming together and coming with ideas. And then it doesn't happen just in the English class, for example, it has to happen everywhere. It has to happen in history. It has to happen in science. It has to happen everywhere. There are many ways to have our students, Black and Brown kids with different backgrounds, different ethnicities, to fully be immersed and engaged in the work that's presented to them, for them to know about, you know, many people that can be for them, scientists that were Black and Brown that contributed and so forth. I think all that stuff is missing. And a lot of time it's the lack of um, you know, teachers don't want to do the work. And then on top of it, you have different immigrant populations. … So there is a lot of that, where we're not taking the time, where the system doesn't take the time to get to know the students, and it's not something that takes time at all. I think, you know, the school communities should respect the students and do that at least.

Nancie: Yeah, I also, I'd like to add, I think especially in schools, I think it's important for . . . schools to partner with different groups, especially community organizations that are working with different students. So, there's a lot that they can learn from there and also finding out what is going on in the students' communities. Um, for example, in the Haitian communities, we've had a—like we've had a surge of students coming from, because a lot of people from Haiti have been going to Brazil, Chile, and then they come here, so you meet a Haitian student who speaks Spanish right now . . . they're so mesmerized by it, or they're so surprised, but if you knew you're serving Haitian students, the least you can do is find out what is going on in their community right now, what is affecting their community right now.

Interviewer: So, if you were in charge, what would your ideal CRSE curriculum, lesson event, or policy look like? If you were principal, or if you were a teacher and you were in charge, how would you teach or what would you teach?

Kelitha: Um, I will, I will try to have, like, more images to show them and also to make them, like, learning about every culture of, like, others, people that isn't the same, like the same peers, so that they know about, like, the culture to not feeling like stereotyping. And also, I will also have, like, such activities, multicultural activities, to make them feel comfortable, make them, like, trying to learn more about other countries.

Stafy: Um, for me, like when you ask the question, what would you teach? Like history just automatically came to my head because in history class, we learn about American history, well, obviously. But, and we also, like, they also mentioned Haitian history, but they don't really, like, go in depth into like other countries. Like I just, 'cause there's not only, like, Haitian and, like, American history. And I think other countries' histories should be more talked about 'cause if you ask me, I
wouldn’t know what happened in other countries, like, I just wouldn’t know. I would just know what they taught me in history class. And I just really think that they should think—they should talk about other countries.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. These are all really excellent, excellent ideas and points you make. … So, in this current social and political climate with all these things happening, what’s one thing that you are concerned about for the remainder of the school year? We’re now in January. What’s one thing that you’re concerned about? And what’s one thing that, despite everything going on, that you’re looking forward to?

**Kelitha:** I’m looking forward, like, for a change, for young people as me, um, immigrants to find more support in school and also for, in school, to have like more, to learn more about like other cultures. And to be, like, to feel comfortable in your school, even you like go to a Caribbean school, to feel like you’re learning a lot.

**Nancie:** I’m very concerned about kids, especially our students. I’m concerned that they’re passing, like they’re passing them because it’s COVID, but … I feel like they’re going to be behind, um, academically. Like I’m really concerned about that because it was already like that without the pandemic, and I feel like with the pandemic, it’s going to be even higher. So, I’m really worried about that. And one thing I’m looking forward to, I guess the new administration. We’ll get a break from crazy Donald Trump. So, I think that I’m looking forward to just peace, less chaos.

**Darnell:** Yeah. Um, for me, I’m very concerned about what the pandemic has done to, not only our immigrant students, because they’re the ones at the bottom of the pyramid, they struggle the most, and resources are always taken from there. But, I’m worried about all Black and Brown students that have, you know, the low graduation rates and so forth. … And then what I’m looking forward to is, um, the future. The pandemic is not here to stay. I’m hoping that we’ll get a new chancellor, we get [a] new administration, not just administration from the country but for me, for the public schools. And we need to have more support for immigrant students that are struggling inside the public schools.

**Stafy:** Um, with the current social and political climate, one thing that I’m concerned about would be students’ mental health, because a lot of people don’t realize it, but actually some students take like comfort in school and like just socializing with their friends from like problems they might have like at home or like in a different community. So, I think that’s one of the things I’m really worried about. And one thing I’m actually looking forward to is school opening back up because I might say that I like online school, but I think it’s better, like, to be in school and actually learn the way that we used to. Because now, just like Ms. Nancie said, I feel like we don’t really learn. We just do the work just to pass and have a good grade, and I don’t think that’s right. I’m just looking forward to school opening back up.

**Kelitha:** Yeah, I wanna add on what Stafy said. Yes, we don’t really learn because now, thanks [to] remotely, you’re just trying to finish it. You’re just like, you want to get over it. You don’t wanna, like, focus on it to learn. You just want to get over it and send it as, like, ASAP. But, I think even [though] that we remote, I think, like, they should, like, do something to entertain students. Or, have like some remote activities, and also give them more information, how they can do to find, like, scholarships online. Because now, things are remote, like people don’t know anything at all. You’re just trying to go online, use your computer for homework, but you don’t know how to make research, how I can find like scholarships as a student, as a senior student, as a junior student, how I can get myself ready for SAT. Like having a forum for that. Even like schools doing town hall [meetings], I feel like they still, like, miss something. It’s just not, like, really create[d] for students.

### Conclusion

Darnell, Nancie, Kelitha, and Stafy are four Haitian American women whose experiences in education span several decades, countries, and boroughs. Throughout the interview, I was struck by how insightful, critical, and nuanced their perspectives were. Transnational consciousness is a
theme that surfaces often, and educators who have global awareness are best equipped to implement the CSRE framework. In order to create a welcoming and affirming environment, educators must use multiple methods to gain knowledge about their students and the communities in which they teach. Stafy and Kelitha both expressed a desire for intellectual challenge and exposure to cultures beyond their own. Kelitha suggested a need for more support when conducting internet research for scholarships, and Stafy wanted to learn about history beyond Haiti and the United States. They are global citizens, and they are asking for an education that reflects their lived realities. Inclusive curricula and assessments account for individual students’ strengths, needs, and learning preferences. Kelitha implored us to have more patience with immigrant students who are emergent bilingual, to adjust the pace of instruction to use nonverbal cues, and to offer multiple opportunities to impart learning—the latter of which is a core feature of universal design for learning. As we listen to their narratives, the imperative of adopting a CSRE framework for instruction is magnified. For educators undertaking this work, listening to the indispensable voices of students and community organizations, like Flanbwayan, is an important first step.

Endnotes
1 The framework is described on the New York State Department of Education website (http://www.nysed.gov/crs/framework)
2 Flanbwayan marked its 15th anniversary in 2020. The organization was founded in 2005.
3 From 1982 to 1985, U.S. scientists and the Centers for Disease Control circulated a list of four groups at high risk of HIV infection—known collectively as the 4H Club: hemophiliacs, heroin users, homosexuals, and Haitians. Overall, the scientific discourse blamed Haitians for bringing AIDS to the United States, and racist violence and discrimination against Haitians and Haitian Americans of all ages was widespread, especially in the metropolitan areas of New York City and Miami, Florida (Cohen, 2007).
4 This definition of Culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) Education is provided on the New York State Education Department website (http://www.nysed.gov/crs/framework)
5 In 2020, the four-year high school graduation rates for all students in New York City were 78.8% and 76.9% for August and June, respectively, an increase from 77.3% and 73.9% in 2019. The rates for English language learners were 45.7% and 42.5% in 2020, and the rates for Black students were 75.9% and 73.8% (New York City Department of Education, n.d.).

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Dr. Kahdeidra Monét Martin is currently a postdoctoral scholar of education at Stanford University. As a transdisciplinary scholar of literacy and sociocultural linguistics, her research explores strategies for culturally sustaining literacy instruction and interrogates notions of transnationalism and multiracial identities with diasporic Black communities. Dr. Martin uses critical race theory, intersectionality, and translanguaging to challenge discourses of deviance and qualitatively examine the co-naturalization of language, race, and spirituality in the lives of African descendant people globally. Her dissertation received the 2022 Outstanding Dissertation Award from the Qualitative Research SIG of the American Educational Research Association.
Abstract

From his perspective as superintendent of the East Upper and Lower Schools in Rochester, New York, and as director of the University of Rochester’s Center for Urban Education Success, Dr. Shaun Nelms shares his experience of growing up in a nearby segregated city and discusses inequitable education, his district’s partnership with the University of Rochester, and the need for culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) education (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2018; Paris, 2012) to transform structural racist school cultures, particularly in underserved communities and segregated cities. During this conversation with Dr. Valerie Marsh, Nelms’s colleague and the assistant director of their research center, Dr. Nelms discusses what it takes to expand CR-S education (NYSED, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2014) beyond one school and into one of the most segregated counties in the nation. In order for CR-S pedagogy to achieve true equity, it must be for all students, not just those attending school in urban areas. Dr. Nelms speaks about how he, his fellow superintendents, and others have collaborated to make CR-S theory a reality in their region (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Keywords: culturally responsive and sustaining education, antiracism, curriculum, equity, school transformation

Introduction

This conversation between urban education leader Dr. Shaun Nelms and his colleague Dr. Valerie Marsh provides insights from Dr. Nelms’s history, his perspective on school transformation and education research, and his comments about the most recent initiative of the Center for Urban Education Success (CUES), which is to create an antiracist curriculum for their region of New York State. The research conducted at CUES involves urban school transformation, both nationally and at the East Upper and Lower Schools (hereafter East) in Rochester, New York. Since 2014, the University of Rochester and East have been involved in a partnership to reimagine the school, which is sanctioned by the New York State Education Department. CUES’s antiracist curricular work extends beyond East and into the county, region, and country. Drs. Nelms and Marsh held a conversation to discuss this culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) education initiative (NYSED, 2018; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014), systemic racism, and education’s role in eradicating it.

Valerie Marsh: There are moments in our lives that can crystallize our thinking and direct (or maybe redirect) us along our professional path. Can you describe one of those?

Shaun Nelms: I often tell a story of my siblings. It was my senior year in high school in Buffalo; my sister came home as a junior and my younger brother came home as an eighth grader. We went through that same routine of pulling out our textbooks, covering them with brown paper, decorating them, talking about our classes, and my sister pulled out the same math text as my younger brother. Two kids, my brother who was being challenged as an eighth grader at a magnet school, and my sister, an 11th grader at a high school focused on business development, who was being taught math with a middle school textbook. I don’t know much about business, but I do know math matters, right? It was in that moment I realized that this notion that kids are successful academically solely because of their hard work or because of the whole bootstrapping mentality—it really was not true. We were in a system in Buffalo that decided early on which kids would be challenged academically and which kids would just be given enough to meet the minimum state standards. It was a turning point for me in understanding the inequities in society, the inequities in education,
and how they are by design and not by chance. When I got into this position at East, I wanted to make sure we didn’t replicate that.

Valerie Marsh: Tell me about East, the school where you are superintendent, and what led to the University of Rochester partnership.

Shaun Nelms: Twenty or thirty years ago, East was once one of the highest performing schools within the city school district, but prior to our intervention in 2015, East had become an “out-of-time school,” as designated by the state, meaning they had tried multiple interventions and thrown a lot of money at the school, and none of it sustained itself in a way that gave confidence that the school would be able to progress year after year. To prevent forced closure, there was an option for the school to be overseen by an independent receiver—in this case, the University of Rochester. At the time, East had a projected graduation rate of 29%. There were other data points, like a 52% dropout or push-out rate in high school, and attendance rates in the ’60s. Again, you could either say these are issues of kids and parents not valuing education, or you can say the system decided a long time before those kids entered that school who would survive and make it through, and who would not make it and would fall victim to the streets. That is not the type of environment education should be promoting. It’s also not the environment the University of Rochester wanted to see continue within our city.

Valerie Marsh: Now that East and the university are more than six years into the partnership, can you give us an idea of the change that’s taken place thus far?

Shaun Nelms: There are still no gates, no pre-entry requirements to come to East, and I am happy that, six years later, we’ve moved to an 85% graduation rate. We’re once again one of the highest performing schools in the district. But I’m not satisfied with that, because if other schools aren’t learning from these experiences of how to change, restructure, and transform their environments, then we will, yet again, repeat what happened to me as a child, when you had some schools being high performing and other schools left behind.

Valerie Marsh: What is the role of CUES, your research center, in all of this?

Shaun Nelms: It’s critically important that the work we do at CUES is designed in a way that will push information out to other urban settings, so that any kid, regardless of zip code or historic structural inequities, will have the opportunity to receive a great education. It’s what drives me now. This is my new turning point—how do I get this information out into [the] hands of leaders who want to lead change with others, but just don’t know how?

Valerie Marsh: One way is through curriculum. Our center is very focused and you are very focused on antiracist curriculum, not only at East but countywide. Can you tell the story of what led up to this effort? Why now?

Shaun Nelms: I first want to honor and say that, for many communities of color, the issues that we are seeing nationally and internationally have been well-documented for decades. They’ve been ignored—often characterized as playing the race card, or “people are lazy,” or “they’re not doing [the] work.” But recently there’s been some acknowledgment by non-communities of color in saying, “You know what? Maybe they weren’t lying this whole time. Maybe I need to rethink my role in perpetuating ignorance by claiming ignorance.” So, I think our education community here in Monroe County, which comprises 18 different districts, was ready to have some honest conversations about how we look in terms of our segregation by race, ethnicity, and economics. And then we had the homicide of Daniel Prude, a Black man who was visiting relatives here. He had a mental health break and he died, unarmed, in police custody. There was video, much like George Floyd, that showed the way in which he was restrained, which ultimately led to his death, and because of it, the entire county erupted. People better understood that this community was more divided than they anticipated or than they wanted to acknowledge. I knew it was time for a disruptive process, and it was going to start with educating our youth. So, in partnership with the superintendents from all 18 county districts, we decided to do something about it. I am so sick of words with no action.
Valerie Marsh: And that action was to create a countywide antiracist curriculum. What were the framing ideas around the curriculum?

Shaun Nelms: We started by asking ourselves, "What can we do to make sure that our students, regardless of zip code, better understand our city, how it developed, and also be informed on how to change it moving forward?" We have to invest in kids, who have the ability to change the future, and not let adults drive it, because we're already at the end of the game. It's also important to say that this curriculum, centered on issues of equity and social justice, is as important for kids in rural and suburban settings as it is for kids in the city, because what happens often is that our students in rural and suburban districts leave those areas having no academic experience with different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and when they go off to college, they often do not major in topics that address those things.

Valerie Marsh: You mentioned the curriculum is locally contextual. Our city has a troubled past . . .

Shaun Nelms: Rochester was one of the first places in the country to have an uprising in the early '60s. In 1964, our city, even before Watts, was protesting against issues in housing, workforce development, and education. There were protests, there was damage, there was civil unrest, there was a police response. What has happened between the 1964 uprising and the recent Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, after Daniel Prude's murder, is what we are going to focus on. We are giving students context for Rochester within the national context leading up to those uprisings, and one of the first things we look at is how words matter. So, in 1964, was it an uprising? Was it a riot? Was it a protest? What do those words mean? What does it mean when the media portrays them differently? You can compare and see the same types of headlines in 2020 with the Black Lives Matter movement. Then, ironically, we actually have an extension activity looking at the U.S. Capitol insurrection in January 2021 and how that was portrayed in the media. You look at racial lines behind how it was portrayed, you look at class lines on how it was portrayed, and you look at political lines of how it was portrayed. Another lesson is actually going to do the same with Hurricane Katrina and how those headlines at times portrayed people as looters and at other times as survivors. So, although they are locally and temporally contextualized, these topics have national and international implications for students as they go through life and strive to analyze complex situations and how things are labeled in ways that benefit some groups and hurt others.

Valerie Marsh: The Rochester City School District is made up primarily of students of color. But many districts in the county have the reverse demographic breakdown, serving primarily white student populations. What did it take, other than timing, to build a wide coalition of educators who aim to resist the systemically racist, segregationist history of the region?

Shaun Nelms: Well, I would hate to say that this would not have happened if Daniel Prude had not died after being in police custody, but if I am honest, I will say it would not have happened if Daniel Prude was not murdered. I say that because I have tried to bring these topics up in the past. It's been a district-by-district decision, or some superintendents have leaned in and others did not. But when this issue re-emerged in Rochester around racial injustice and inequities last summer, some people were comfortable to jump right in, while others were noticeably nervous about how their communities would respond and how they would sell this to their school boards. I really went after the curricular connection to this work and said to them that we, as superintendents, control the curriculum. We, as superintendents, can make a direct alignment between our city's history and the state's U.S. history learning standards. We have to remind them this is history. This is U.S. history. This is our local city history. This is state history, and all kids should know it, understand it, and be able to discuss it moving forward. Once superintendents understood that what they were doing was something they should have been doing all along, it was much easier to lean in. Had I gone out there and said, "This is the moral thing to do," then I am putting my morality above that of others. But helping people understand content and context allowed them to move their school environments. I am just so proud of the Monroe County superintendents who are taking on the fight with their school boards and with certain community members, who are saying things like, “This is a liberal agenda” or “Indoctrination.” Next, each superintendent assigned teachers or
curriculum leaders to co-develop the curriculum. That was critically important. I am not going to write this curriculum for you. Those teachers are going to be the experts who will take the capacity they’ve built collaboratively and then distribute that work back to their districts. That is how we tackle this, and I am excited that we began piloting some of these lessons, beginning in April 2021, and that all schools will have the responsibility to teach them in grades 8, 11, and 12 by April 2022. We are excited about that, because this has never been done before.

Valerie Marsh: How are you supporting districts with implementation?

Shaun Nelms: Districts that have a progressive and strategic superintendent need less support because they have already been doing work around creating equity, whether it’s in special ed or in Title IX issues or whatever it is, right? For them, this is just part of their overall plan. For districts that are just getting started, they may need more support, because they may be in communities where the school boards may bring pressure, calling this antiracist instruction a “liberal agenda” or “socialism.” So, if I’m working with a district where many are scared to say the word “racist” or “antiracist,” I have to build capacity with them over time. That’s a level of engagement, understanding, and support that our research center can definitely provide. CUES is well positioned since we work so closely with East—a school that has been doing this culturally sustaining work for years. At this point, CUES is leading this work, by example and in consultation with districts to support their leadership development with CR-S curricula (NYSED, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2014). We have the experience of bringing people along, learning, and understanding their processes and their progress while maintaining curricular standards throughout, and so we can help districts that are already there, as well as districts that are just getting started. But we cannot assess where people are. That has to be an internal process.

Valerie Marsh: There’s a second project the research center has been working on—the elevatededucator.org website. Can you speak about that?

Shaun Nelms: We developed elevatededucator.org, which shares some of East’s emerging lessons and units that meet CR-S education (NYSED, 2018: Paris & Alim, 2014) expectations, as well as state learning standards. They are pulled from our curriculum and are open-sourced so that folks can access them and get started. The platform provides content for subject areas beyond U.S. history. We have lessons for art, music, science, and history, as well as English and math, and we show examples of how educators can implement a culturally sustaining pedagogical framework in every classroom.

Valerie Marsh: Culturally sustaining education honors a tradition of advocacy, resistance, and scholarship for our students (Paris & Alim, 2014). How do you see the instruction that is being developed in Monroe County and curricula at East as honoring those traditions?

Shaun Nelms: Well, I believe that the curriculum we are developing has a strong student voice. The inquiries are focused on and developed to give kids context first, and then we facilitate conversations that allow them to discuss, argue, and dissent. Then the extension projects have students think about how to pursue their ideas in the world. For example, in a U.S. history unit on resistance to colonization, the final assessment has students explain what further actions a specific oppressed group (of their choosing) should take next in the fight for resistance. This type of assignment is different from students sitting in a classroom, where they are receiving information and taking a test. Instead, these become actionable plans written by kids who choose to take their understandings and beliefs beyond the classroom.

Valerie Marsh: Education scholars are recentering the concept of love in education. I am thinking of Bettina Love (2019), David Kirkland (National Council of Teachers of English, 2020), [and] our own Joanne Larson (2014), for example. What is the place of love in this work?

Shaun Nelms: I had one student say she was sitting in her classroom reading the work of Marcus Garvey and comparing it to Malcolm X. She was listening because her dad, who is Jamaican, always talks about Marcus Garvey. It was the first time that she saw something her dad was talking about at
home being taught in school. She was listening to see if her teacher was correct, but also to be able to correct her father if he was wrong about Garvey's writings. That teacher, knowing that kid was of Jamaican descent, as many kids in the school were, intentionally chose to use Marcus Garvey in comparison to Malcolm X, which showed her loving appreciation of those students and what they needed to see in that lesson that was relevant to them. That’s a display of love—knowing your kids, honoring who they are, and going the extra step to have them see themselves in the lessons, in the curriculum, and in the assessment. But love is also fighting against systems that do the complete opposite. If you are truly focused on the development of a child yet you allow systems to damage, hurt, and disenfranchise them, then I would say you are perpetuating hate, right? So, at East, to create a system that perpetuated “the have and the have-nots,” to select kids who were “worthy” of their education and to leave other ones to fend for themselves, like my sister, would not be a display of love. But to fight (at times) against other superintendents, school boards, or community members who want to perpetuate the notion that some kids deserve this while others do not would have gone against everything I morally, ethically, and academically believe in.

Valerie Marsh: You mentioned earlier that maintaining ignorance is a way for people to stay comfortable amidst racism, which perpetuates harmful systems that hurt actual, real children and people. Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (2019) writes about this stance as being racist and the difference between being racist and antiracist. Dr. Love (2019) talks about the difference between being an ally and a co-conspirator. In a recent talk she gave at our university, she said, “What a co-conspirator understands is, I got to give something up, I got to take a risk.” (Love, 2021). So, I ask you, where’s the risk? Where’s the skin in the game for this new curriculum and this whole project of urban school transformation and all school transformation?

Shaun Nelms: Let me answer this way. I think people have to give up the excuse that they have been using. I think that, in the past, people have said, “Well, I just didn’t know,” “I was unsure,” “Had I known . . .” or “Hey, how can a white teacher know this?” I say, “In the same way that a Black teacher knows it.” To make the assumption that race is the definitive measure of knowledge on a particular construct is ridiculous. But you have to engage in ways that allow you to experience your own ignorance for the purpose of changing it, right? I encourage teachers here [at East] to make a new mistake every single day. As people allow themselves to be vulnerable and ignorant—and in ways that position them to be more competent and effective later on—we have to welcome that, which means you have to give people space and grace in that process. You have to allow people to mess up, to maybe say the wrong things, to ask questions that may seem trivial to you, but to them could be the definitive moment of understanding one perspective over another. From a university standpoint, we have to acknowledge that, perhaps those who have been responsible for leading our education initiatives, their focus needs some retooling. They need to get in the spaces we are trying to support—in schools, in communities—which allows them to create a loving relationship, not just between them and the theory but between them and the practice.

Valerie Marsh: So maybe this next one seems obvious, but what gives you hope in this work?

Shaun Nelms: I think that when you grow up a person of color, you’re reminded of inequities since birth—you see it everywhere you go, and you may not be able to explain it or to describe it as a youth, but you see it. You know something is not right. Then, you go to college and you see the same inequities at a different level. It’s who has access to college and how they will be influenced professionally moving forward. Then, as an adult, you are reminded, yet again, that these inequities exist, from job promotions or just from professional acknowledgment, or from being marginalized in meetings and a continued sense of being inadequate and being an imposter in these settings. What gives me hope is that I think white folks feel like imposters right now. They are in spaces that they’ve seen and known were wrong, but they didn’t acknowledge it or know how to navigate the situation. What gives me hope is that people who are not from marginalized communities are willing to be imposters and to not remain comfortable in their own ignorance. They are giving it a try. Within their communities, they are supporting and challenging one another. I talk to my friends, and you are one of them, about the conversations, the hidden conversations. People are asking tougher questions. They are not letting ignorant comments just lie there and then waiting to talk about it on
the drive home from the party. They are calling them out in the moment and being supported by others in that moment who agree with them but didn’t feel empowered to say something before. We want to do for our kids the things that, as adults, we are shy to do, and that’s to call out inequities in the moment. We want our kids to be empowered, positioned, and prepared to change society in the moment and not to pass on that responsibility to the next generation.

Valerie Marsh: Related to that, I will share a piece of advice you gave me this summer, which I return to often. It’s deceptively simple. You said, “You’re going to feel uncomfortable and you need to stay with it.” What I’m starting to realize is that feeling uncomfortable, this discomfort—which previously was my privilege to avoid—now that I feel it, is not going away. I’m just always going to be uncomfortable now, and I’ve accepted that. I share your advice with anyone who listens or reads this.

Shaun Nelms: Well, that describes the life of many people of color. We have lived the life of being uncomfortable. It’s the real work, and I truly believe we can create a community of learners, kids, and adults whom we entrust our kids to, to be empowered to have these uncomfortable conversations—however they want to take them up—but to no longer ignore the racism that is obvious or that is obvious to some of us. I think we’ll be a much better society than before.

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Since Drs. Nelms and Marsh had this conversation, the Monroe County curriculum project has gained momentum and expanded. Several new districts joined the effort, drawn by the timeliness of the antiracist content of the units. In preparation for a 2022 rollout of the curriculum, Nelms and his team have trained more than 200 teachers from across the county. What began as 18 participating districts have grown to 22, including rural districts outside the county that have signed up for summer training. To meet the demand of district participation, CUES has hired additional trainers. Excited to implement what they learned during the first round of training, several teachers began piloting the curriculum in their U.S. history classes in spring 2021. CUES has begun measuring teacher readiness, student engagement, and conceptual understanding of the content through pre- and post-assessments. Simultaneously, the elevated educator website continues to add more standards-aligned CR-S lessons and units. All of this work—both the countywide curriculum and the website—are provided at no charge to the community.

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Valerie L. Marsh, PhD, is an associate professor at the University of Rochester’s Warner School of Education and Human Development and assistant director of the university’s Center for Urban Education Success. Her research interests include topics pertinent to urban education change and adolescent literacies of power. She can be reached at vmarsh@warner.rochester.edu.
Abstract

This interview provides insight into the lack of representation for educators of color in schools across America and explicates the importance of having education programs that are designed to develop culturally intelligent educators. The purpose of this piece is to enlighten, empower, and encourage educational entities and communities to address the gap in representation of African American and Latinx educators and educator preparation programs directly and collaboratively—not only to increase representation within the education profession but to create and implement mechanisms that will retain educators of color in the profession over the long term. The principle of ongoing professional learning typically involves educators seeking and receiving training and learning from education experts. LaTisha Cole argues that educators should instead seek authentic learning opportunities from the students and families they serve.

Keywords: cultural intelligence, retention, representation, teacher preparation, student- and parent-led professional development

Introduction

This interview was conducted during Episode 10 of “Diary of A Mad Black Teacher: The Podcast,” a podcast created and hosted by LaTisha Cole. The interview is a call for colleges and universities to create education programs that partner with urban schools, and to modify their educator prep coursework to include training and learning that will develop educators who are prepared to effectively educate marginalized students, including students of color. Enabling all stakeholders to develop a culturally responsive and sustaining mindset is only possible when they are given opportunities and platforms to co-create curriculum, content, policies, activities, and professional learning. Those opportunities build culturally responsive, intelligent, impactful, and effective educators who will create transformational learning environments that are inclusive of the entire school community.

Inspired by the thousands of stories she has heard in her 12 years as an educator, Cole created the podcast to provide a safe space for parents, educators, and others who care about students of color to learn how to educate and advocate for their students/children. The podcast enables students from marginalized groups to express themselves freely and receive information that is specifically designed to help them successfully navigate a systemically oppressive education system.

This interview is focused on two principles from the New York State Education Department (2020) culturally responsive and sustaining education framework. The strategies and practices embedded in the interview align with the framework’s principles of providing a welcoming and affirming environment, and ongoing professional learning. They provide a guide for educators and parents who wish to implement these principles in their school communities.

The principle of providing a welcoming and affirming environment is usually a focal point for schools that are trying to establish and foster strong relationships with students and their families. Cole maintains that the principle should be intentionally applied to educators as well, as it is critical to the development, success, and retention of exceptional educators. This is especially true for educators of color, who are leaving the profession in alarming numbers: “The research is clear on how teachers of color benefit students, yet many states continue to struggle with recruiting and retaining teachers of color” (Trust, 2021). Retaining these teachers is essential to student success.
Interview

Ms. Cole: Hello and welcome to a special edition of “Diary of A Mad Black Teacher: The Podcast.” Today we have five loyal listeners who will ask me questions in a Q&A interview style. Our first question comes from high school student Dylan.

Dylan: How can we get more teachers who are minorities back into the schools?

Ms. Cole: That is a great question, Dylan. For years, many private, state, and federal initiatives have allocated funds to encourage and recruit people of color to go into the teaching profession. However, many of these initiatives require those individuals to already possess a bachelor’s degree, citizenship, and they cannot have a criminal record. This alone eliminates or discourages some people of color who are interested in going into education but cannot easily meet those criteria. Even when we look at people of color who can take advantage of initiatives to go into education, the statistics are discouraging. For example, in the 2003-2004 school year, approximately 47,600 minorities became teachers. By the end of next school year, more than 56,000 minority teachers had left the profession. Also, the push to close schools in impoverished neighborhoods is working in contradiction to these initiatives, which overwhelmingly negatively impacts the employment of educators of color.

Getting teachers of color back into the schools is an obstacle, but keeping teachers of color is the real challenge, in my opinion, for three main reasons that I will discuss today.

First, many teachers of color want to work in schools where the student body represents them, but unfortunately, many of those schools are underperforming, difficult places to work in, due to the high demands, minimal resources, and lack of support the job offers. But let’s not be misled: there are many high-performing schools in low-income areas or where the student population is primarily composed of students of color, but there are not enough of them. When a school is not conducive to a healthy work environment, teachers of color are more likely to leave the profession—more so than their white counterparts, who often will leave that unhealthy school and go to a predominantly white school. This is unfortunate, because predominantly white schools need...
representation of educators of color too. Increasing the encounters that white students have with successful, intelligent people of color helps break down the negative narratives and connotations placed upon them.

Second, most teachers of color feel they are not supported and report feeling ostracized, overworked, and micromanaged, and suffer from working in a highly chaotic and toxic work environment. They are encouraged by initiatives or intrinsic motivation to enter the profession, but are they valued and encouraged to stay when they get there? Are they seen as a necessity for student success and treated as such? My experience leads me to answer “no” to both those questions. In the education profession, which is statistically driven, the highly positive impact teachers of color have on the educational and social-emotional experience of students of color is widely known.

Research proves over and over again that, when Black and Latinx students have teachers who share their race or ethnicity, better attendance, fewer suspensions, higher self-esteem, higher test scores, and higher graduation rates and college attendance are the results. When something is a proven factor in student success, we must approach it differently than if it is just a “bonus.” Many schools treat hiring a bilingual or educator of color as a bonus: “If we can find one great, if not it’s OK.” However, it is not OK. If there is a shortage of teachers, which there is, we see programs reaching out to recruit middle school students for summer programs to guide them into the education profession. However, we do not see this mode of urgency or creativity for the recruitment of teachers of color on a consistent basis, and we must shift that narrative—including the narrative that teaching is not a career that brilliant people go into.

Which brings me to my third reason. Many people of color and/or people from impoverished areas encourage the brilliant children in their family to become a doctor, lawyer, engineer. Being a teacher is not admired or encouraged by many families. The number of people who respect teachers but would never want to be one or for their child to be one is alarmingly high. We don’t see many people encouraging their children or students to take the route of education as a profession—largely because educators are underpaid, overworked, and unappreciated.

However, education programs at several Ivy League schools are trying to change this narrative by asking the smartest undergraduate students, specifically students of color, to enter the education profession. Harvard is one of them. Harvard asks students to make a seven-year commitment, and in return, it negotiates an admirable salary from the school they will work in upon completion of the education program. Harvard also provides these future teachers with daily access to counsel, advice, mentorship, and in-school support.

Programs like this encourage and protect teachers of color in the profession and will help them stay in the profession. We need to normalize programs like these, which have examined the reasons why we need people of color represented in schools, how we can close the representation gap, how we can better support teachers of color to stay in and be successful in the profession. These programs should lead the way in helping us get and keep educators of color.

Cynthia (parent): My question is, how do we keep teachers from quitting? I have seen so many of my son’s good black and Hispanic teachers leave before my daughter gets to have them, and my kids are only three years apart.

Ms. Cole: Thank you, Ms. Cynthia. As I recently stated, this is a collaborative effort that I believe begins with everyone understanding the value and benefits of having teachers of color in all our schools. Parents understanding the importance of and demanding more representation in the schools they help fund through their property taxes is crucial. Parents using their voices and exercising their power to ensure that the district administration, local officials, and board members are very clear on the communities’ and parents’ high expectations for a diversified staff that represents the student body is very important. Once parents and other stakeholders apply that pressure, school districts will be forced to implement a plan to help close the representation gap, and that plan will include mechanisms that help attract and, most importantly, keep educators of color in schools.
Lastly, I think something that is very important and so simple, but is easily a missed mark, is parents showing gratitude to the teachers who are great to their children no matter their race/ethnicity. Parents, you are partners with educators in your children's educational process. It is your responsibility to praise and acknowledge the teachers who do amazing things for your children. Those kind words and acts of gratitude play a huge part in encouraging teachers to stay in the profession. It helps them know they are needed and valued, and that the work they are doing is not in vain or going unnoticed or unappreciated. Parents should partner with other parents and the school administration to see how to celebrate or regularly make gestures of appreciation for the teachers.

**Mrs. Arnold (reading specialist/instructional coach):** Do you think cultural intelligence training should be mandated, and if so, how?

**Ms. Cole:** Hello, Mrs. Arnold, and thank you for being an ally and advocate. In short, yes, I do think cultural intelligence coursework, training, and simulations should be mandatory for all individuals, and especially education professionals. There are many ways to help build cultural intelligence. Every month, my staff and teachers must complete four hours of professional development that builds their capacity . . . for cultural intelligence and sensitivity. The best part is that the professional developments are led by students and parents. And it helps teach cultural intelligence to my teachers in a very fun way. There are workshops held weekly; for example, paella cooking class, salsa dancing class, hair-braiding class, street artwork class, paczki-making class. These classes are led and taught to our teachers by our students, their parents, and community members. Teachers pick two classes a month to go to, which satisfies their four hours of mandatory professional development, and it gets them immersed in their students' culture. It increases their positive and meaningful interactions with their students and families. The teachers and staff get incentives to bring their own family member(s) to these classes with them, because I not only want my teachers/staff to be culturally intelligent, I want their families and the people who support them at home to be as well.

This not only has increased cultural intelligence, . . . it has significantly improved the morale, culture, and climate in our building among teachers, students, and their families. Mrs. Arnold, please start by working with your school administration, local school board members, and other stakeholders to find creative ways for your school community to increase cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence is very important, and I encourage you to keep going until it is recognized as a virtue and expectation that everyone in your school community must possess.

**Ms. Brown (elementary teacher/former paraprofessional):** I was a paraprofessional for eight years. I am now one of four Black educators on a staff of 169. Most of our teachers are white and most of the support staff are Black or Hispanic; 67% of our students are Hispanic and 32% are Black. As a paraprofessional, teachers always expected me to be the disciplinarian for our students. I was treated poorly and talked down to. That encouraged me to become a teacher. I noticed that, in my education program, there was no training or literature on how teachers should work with support staff. Now that I am a teacher in the same building where I was a paraprofessional, I am treated a little better by my peers, but now I am always asked to lead projects for diversity or talk to the “difficult” students, or lead parent groups. I love the relationships I get to build with students and their families, but I am tired of watching other teachers do the bare minimum. I feel like if I say no to extra responsibilities, I will not be helping my students, who need me so badly. What should I do?

**Ms. Cole:** Ms. Brown, I would like to say thank you for noticing the need for you to be in a higher position in education and taking the necessary steps to become a teacher. We definitely need you! Unfortunately, what you described is not uncommon. In my school, all the front office support staff are Hispanic women, all the custodians are Hispanic males and females, and besides myself, all the administrators are white and 91% of teachers are white, and all the paraprofessionals are Hispanic or Black.

Having one group designated to do a task of a certain sort leads to loads of extra responsibilities delegated to very few people and requires little to no accountability from others. For example, any time teachers needed translation, they would go to the ladies in the front office; anytime diversity and equity training needed to happen, they would come to me or the black teachers. This creates burnout for some and lacks accountability for others to learn how to service their students.
and families. We created teams to lighten the load of some and to hold all accountable for being culturally intelligent and present for their students and families. One example of this is that students get course credit for teaching their teachers Spanish along with the Spanish teachers, who rotate monthly and get paid a stipend to facilitate student-led afterschool Spanish courses.

Teachers who pass these courses get first pick at extracurricular duty, which pays very well, and they are celebrated all month in various ways. We have the same program to teach teachers American Sign Language, and our students also lead that course. This creates more bilingual staff, takes the load off the few to translate constantly, it builds relationships between teachers and students, allows students to earn extra credits, and empowers them by teaching their teachers. It also allows teachers to become more culturally intelligent and accessible to their students and families. We created clubs in the same way for diversity, discipline, culture, and climate. All teachers are required to serve or participate in at least one club. This ensures that the onus is taken off a few individuals and allows many people to work together instead of burning out two or three people. Now, the final question for tonight is from Dr. Monroe.

**Dr. Monroe (principal):** What is the best way to partner with education preparatory programs? I love getting student teachers in my building and I think it's great, but more needs to be done to help them be successful in the profession through their prep work. I don't think what these aspiring teachers are learning is applicable in a real school setting. They are learning theory and statistics from books, not the real-life challenges they will face when teaching human children, specifically human children who are poor and dealing with trauma, violence in their homes and neighborhoods, homelessness, and hunger.

**Ms. Cole:** Dr. Monroe, that is a great question, thank you for asking. I have many strategies and ways to go about partnering with educator prep programs, but for the sake of time, I'll share my favorite one.

Most student teachers who come into our buildings work with an experienced teacher. Two things rarely happen. Student teachers rarely work with a school administrator, and rarely do the administrator and supervising teacher work directly with the student teacher's education program dean, coordinator, evaluator, etc.

Working with a school administrator gives the student teacher insight into what the school leader will be evaluating them on. It helps them understand what the school leader's expectations are for them, and that is a game-changer for someone who is new to the profession. I do mock evaluations consistently with the student teachers in my building to give them an extra layer of meaningful feedback. I also let students and parents rate their performance through a Google survey, which gives them live feedback on how they are educating and impacting the most important people in my building and school community. This is very helpful, and they always thank me for taking the time to evaluate and share feedback with them, as that helps them perfect their craft.

Lastly, having strategic planning meetings with collegiate education programs allows you as the principal to teach them how to prepare teachers to be successful in your building. Training them on what you need in your school is much better than them teaching aspiring educators what they think will work in your school. I have meetings with the deans and coordinators of all seven nearby education preparatory programs once a month. It is a recurring meeting, where we strategically plan together, look at data from our schools and programs, the success rates of my students and their students when paired with each other, and we design backward together to ensure that we are working and progressing toward the same goals. With virtual meetings now very accessible, thanks to the pandemic, meeting with large groups is so much easier. Many education programs are thrilled to work with school administrations and other nearby education preparatory programs. I have formed a team of administrators within my district from the elementary, middle school, and high schools to ensure that the colleges get feedback and planning time with us all.
References


LaTisha Cole holds a master’s degree in educational leadership. Over the past 11 years, she has served as a high school social studies teacher, coordinator, behavioral interventionist, and head softball coach. She is currently an assistant high school principal in the Dallas Independent School District. Her expertise is in the elevation of marginalized students and students of color and in teaching those who educate children how to work to dismantle systemic oppression in the education system. She can be reached at diaryofamadblackteacher@gmail.com.
Culturally Relevant Leadership and Emancipatory Leadership: Linking Black Education and Social Justice Struggles Going Forward

Abstract

In January 2020, in response to the criticism that New York City schools don’t reflect the experiences of students of color, the New York State Education Department (2020) released the Culturally responsive and sustaining Education Framework. While the culturally responsive and sustaining education (CR-SE) initiative in New York City schools aims to bring a well-rounded curriculum that centers on many cultures into the classroom, there is still a lack of diverse curriculum and reading material (Gooden, 2019). Discussion of how CR-SE can serve as an emancipatory approach in Black education has been lacking since its creation. To get a better understanding of the liberating and emancipatory practices CR-SE offers, I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Sonya Douglass.

Keywords: culturally responsive and sustaining education, Black education, the scale framework for emancipatory education and leadership

Introduction

Dr. Douglass is Professor of Education Leadership at Columbia University Teachers College, where she conducts research and teaches courses on the politics of race and inequality in education. She has published more than 20 articles in journals including Educational Administration Quarterly, Education Policy, and Teachers College Record, edited three books on educational equity and leadership, and authored two award-winning books: Learning in a Burning House: Educational Inequality, Ideology, and (Dis)Integration and The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality: Toward Democratic Possibilities for Schooling (with Janelle T. Scott and Gary L. Anderson). Since 2016, Dr. Douglass has served as co-director of the Urban Education Leaders Program at Teachers College, which is an Ed.D. program for practicing and aspiring district-level education leaders committed to equity, justice, and excellence. In 2017, Dr. Douglass founded the Black Education Research Collective (BERC) to convene scholars devoted to conducting, translating, and disseminating research that leads to improved educational opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for Black children and youth. In 2020, she launched the SDH Collaborative (affectionately known as “the Lab”) to create a generative and supportive research and learning environment for current and former students interested in solving education problems through research, advocacy, and action.

In this conversation with Dr. Douglass, she shared insights into the 2021 study, Black Education in the Wake of COVID-19 & Systemic Racism: Toward a Theory of Change & Action, and what the prospects are for CR-SE pedagogy going forward. We also discussed the importance of a PK-12 interdisciplinary Black Studies curriculum for New York City students; the COVID-19 pandemic as a portal for educators; The SCALE Framework for Emancipatory Education and Leadership as a conceptual tool designed to support learners and leaders of all ages at the classroom, school, and district levels; and where it is actually possible to measure CR-SE.
**Interview**

**Honey Walrond:** During the summer of 2021, the BERC released *Black Education in the Wake of COVID-19 & Systemic Racism: Toward a Theory of Change & Action*. What has the study revealed about CR-SE teaching and learning practices, going forward?

**Dr. Douglass:** The study spoke extensively about the need to ensure that teachers are better prepared and equipped to educate Black students in particular. And that includes everything from just understanding their experience as Black children to us understanding Black history and culture, and how that knowledge should be shaping teaching and leadership. So the study, I think, confirms what we already knew, but it really showed that, during COVID and given the challenges associated with virtual learning and remote learning, there's still great need as it relates to the preparation of teachers and leaders around culturally responsive and sustaining education.

**Honey Walrond:** The study also spoke to how, "despite school districts preparing to open their physical school buildings safely in September, they remain unprepared to educate Black students effectively while ensuring their safety and well-being" (Horsford et al., 2021, 15). How can school districts be sure to center on culturally responsive learning approaches under such conditions?

**Dr. Douglass:** I think school districts, you know, they have a huge responsibility right now and are facing tremendous challenges. But, as we really think about the school system, hopefully, once we emerge out of this pandemic that we're still confronted with, that we will take this as a time to reflect on what we want from our schools and what the role of schools and school districts should be in supporting families and communities. There should be serious investment in our teachers, counselors, our capacity to support students with social-emotional learning and mental health supports. But, just making sure that we're doing the reflective work as individuals and as institutional leaders to ensure that we're meeting the needs of all students, . . . that, I think, begins with professional learning, professional development, and, again, reexamining the practices that we've been engaging in up to this point and thinking about how we can ensure that we are creating spaces of belonging, support, and safety for all students.

**Honey Walrond:** Why is the BERC Education Equity Action Plan PK-12 interdisciplinary Black Studies curriculum important for New York City students right now?

**Dr. Douglass:** Well, we are so excited to be able to play a role in the development of this historic curriculum. It's long overdue, but we definitely want to seize this moment and are seeing it as an opportunity to transform our schools in our educational system by integrating and incorporating the content, the knowledge, experiences, and the wisdom of practice that we know is reflected in the Black Studies curriculum. And so, we are so excited about what this will mean for all students in understanding that there is not one particular worldview or one cultural tradition or one way of being in the world, but that there's much that we can learn from African civilizations, from Black history, from the cultural traditions of peoples of African descent, and that will enrich not only the experiences and educational opportunities for Black students but for all of the students in New York City.

**Honey Walrond:** The BERC COVID study stated that "many parents spoke to the responsibility they have to correct racist curricula and supplement their child's schooling so they are accurately learning about the history of the U.S., Black history, and the Black experience in America" (Horsford et al., 2021, 15). In what ways does the Black Studies curriculum serve as a stand-alone curriculum and not a supplement?

**Dr. Douglass:** Well, I think what we are experiencing even as we embark on the development of the curriculum is how an intentional Black Studies curriculum requires us to engage in transformation. I mean, it's really transforming the way that we think about content, the way that we think about teaching and learning and leadership, and the role that students, parents, community members, and educators play in education . . . I think in addition to it being a curriculum that can stand on its own, the process of developing this curriculum really requires us to think about what is currently

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being taught in schools, how certain communities and students are not represented in that curriculum, and how we can ensure that our children are seen and see themselves in the curriculum . . . It’s part of our larger value commitments to equity and justice, in our communities and in society.

Honey Walrond: You bring up transformation, which I think is a very important keyword right now. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, who is, you know, the leading theorist around culturally responsive education, sees the COVID pandemic as a portal for educators across the country to rethink how they teach and how students learn. What is The SCALE Framework and how does it connect to an emancipatory approach toward education?

Dr. Douglass: The SCALE Framework [see Image 1] is actually The SCALE Framework for Emancipatory Education and Leadership, and it’s a conceptual tool for teachers, leaders, and learning organizations that are committed to educational equality and freedom. The acronym SCALE refers to the five concepts associated with the framework, which include self-knowledge, culture, agency, liberation, and ethics/enduring values. And so SCALE provides an accessible approach to advancing equity within classrooms and organizations from the inside out through culturally relevant teaching and leadership practices that are committed to the affirmative development of learners of all ages everywhere—everyone, from the preschool student to the school board member. It also acknowledges the historical and structural imbalances in power that are characteristic of organizations and institutions in the United States, which were largely established under a system of separate but equal, while recognizing that our systems have always been separate but they’ve never been equal. And so, as a corrective to these systems, cultures, and ideologies, which have privileged one particular set of knowledge claims, contributions, and worldviews, SCALE represents a shift from the rhetoric of diversity, equity, and inclusion toward an emancipatory vision of education and leadership that’s committed to ensuring that learners and leaders of all cultures and backgrounds are integrated into the vision that values culture, operations, and leadership of the organizations in which they learn and they lead.

Honey Walrond: Now we have an understanding of what culturally relevant leadership is and emancipatory leadership. How would you say it connects the Black education and social justice struggles going forward?

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**IMAGE 1.**

**THE SCALE FRAMEWORK FOR EMANCIPATORY EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP**

**SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

**Eye of Horus**

Knowledge, lifelong education, and continued quest for knowledge (Ancient Egypt)

“Know thyself.”

**CULTURE**

**Sankofa**

Importance of history, culture, and heritage to know yourself and the world around you (Adinkra)

“Go back and retrieve it.”

**AGENCY**

**Menso Wo Kenten**

Industry, self-reliance, and economic self-determination (Adinkra)

“I am not carrying your basket.”

**LIBERATION**

**Fawohodie**

Independence, emancipation, and freedom (Adinkra)

“Independence comes with its responsibilities.”

**ETHICS/VALUES**

**Ma’at**

Ethical and moral principles for a fair, just, orderly, and harmonious world (Ancient Egypt)

42 Laws; 7 Principles: truth, balance, order, harmony, righteousness, morality, and justice
Dr. Douglass: So, I think culturally relevant leadership culture, responsive leadership, and emancipatory leadership—in many ways they all reflect what has been the long freedom struggle, the long Black freedom struggle for equal education. And I think that is what's so powerful. What we tried to do here at the Black Education Research Collective is to make those connections very clear, to make sure that we are linking the work that we're doing currently to those historic struggles by recognizing the work of our ancestors and of our elders and the great challenges that they had to overcome. Much of our work is simply taking the lessons that we've learned from them, taking their wisdom and their experiences to help strengthen us and to give us the tools that we need to create the type of future that we want to see for our children.

Honey Walrond: In conversation about an emancipatory approach to education, there has been a lot of talk around decolonization. How would you say culturally relevant and emancipatory leadership go together, considering that any model of emancipation is shaped by . . . oppressive culture?

Dr. Douglass: I think emancipatory leadership—in my view it's really geared toward acknowledging the systems of domination and oppression that exist. And so, while I believe that culturally relevant pedagogy as theorized by Gloria Ladson Billings certainly addresses those issues of power and socio-political context, I think some of the narratives around culturally relevant education have not centered this issue of power and domination in ways that are really important. And so, emancipatory leadership is really reminding us again that the current system that we're operating in was not designed to serve our students well, and in fact that, while education can be emancipatory, it can also be a form of enslavement. And so, we are recognizing again the power of knowledge, whose knowledge we're using, and whose knowledge we're valuing. That emancipatory leadership is as much about freeing our minds from the ideologies that can continue to subjugate us as it is about understanding our rights of citizenship and the rights that were afforded us under the protection of the law.

Honey Walrond: Dr. Edmund Gordon, whom you have the privilege of working closely with . . . at Teachers College, is himself a disciple, a student of W. E. B. DuBois. Dr. Gordon recognizes that all cultural groups are capable of excellence and that its expressions are myriad, as our human family is diverse. Dr. Gordon speaks specifically to this in his 2019 book, Human Variance and Assessment for Learning. Is CR-SE something we can actually measure and, if so, in what ways?

Dr. Douglass: Now, this is a great question. I obviously admire the amazing work and contributions of Professor Gordon and his scholarship, and it certainly is informing the work that we're doing on the Black Studies curriculum and how we even think about teaching and learning, given all of the new science that we have around how humans learn. We're actually pursuing this question as part of a project funded by the Institute of Education Sciences on culturally responsive schools where we're developing a set of rubrics to help individuals determine what a culturally responsive school actually looks like. But in terms of measurement, I guess what I would say is that, although we in education often are focused on advancing equity, diversity, inclusion, and integration, to me those are actually qualities of a culturally responsive educational system. And so, if we are successful . . . the measures that we'll see will be schools that are integrated, schools that do reflect diversity, schools where all children have access to opportunity, and . . . rather than value what we measure, we will be at a place where we can measure what we truly value.

To learn more about the Black Education Research Collective, visit blackedresearch.org.

References
Honey Walrond is an instructor and PhD Fellow in the Arts and Humanities Department, English Education program at Teachers College, Columbia University. She teaches courses on African American and Black Diaspora literature, and culturally relevant literature and literacy practices. She is also a curriculum designer/developer. Her academic interest is the reading and teaching approaches of twentieth and twenty-first-century African American and Black diaspora literature. She can be reached at honey.walrond@tc.columbia.edu.
Arturo Schomburg’s Place in an Antiracist Curriculum

Catherine G. Khadabux

Abstract

In this paper, I argue the benefits of incorporating a study of the life and archival works of scholar Arturo Schomburg into the canon of an antiracist, culturally responsive and sustaining education curriculum. Scholars traditionally study Schomburg in the context of the Latin American independence movements or in relation to his involvement with the Harlem Renaissance. In this paper, I discuss Schomburg’s life and show how two of his works, Excerpt from Racial Integrity: A Plea for the Establishment of a Chair of Negro History in Our Schools and Colleges and “A Negro Digs Up His Past,” mirror the rhetoric used by antiracist educators and activists today. Finally, I describe the pedagogical merit in Schomburg’s archival work as a basis for a culturally responsive and sustaining education unit of study in a New York City high school English class.

Keywords: Arturo Schomburg, antiracist curriculum, intersectionality, antiracist rhetoric, archival project

Introduction

With the recent rise of movements addressing systemic racism, the term “antiracist” has become part of the mainstream vernacular. In the United States, many educators are capitalizing on this momentum and making efforts to modify their curricula to be more aligned with antiracist ideologies. Developed by a panel of experts in 2018, New York State’s culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) education framework was created to do just that. Recognizing that a “complex system of biases and structural inequities is . . . deeply rooted in our country’s history, culture, and institutions” (New York State Education Department, n.d., para 2), the CR-S framework offers educators suggestions about how to make their classrooms more antiracist by emphasizing the importance of inclusive curricula and assessments. For the urban educator attempting to revise their curriculum to be more aligned with the New York State CR-S framework, a study of the life and work of Arturo Schomburg holds promise. Schomburg was a Puerto Rican-born bibliophile—and, later, a New Yorker—whose work collecting artifacts from the Black diaspora led to the creation of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. By studying Arturo Schomburg, educators, particularly those in New York City, can revise and revitalize their curriculum to be more aligned with the antiracist goals of the CR-S framework and to facilitate important discussions about identity with their students.

Schomburg’s Personal History: The Origin of His Scholarship

To understand the antiracist application of his works, it’s important to learn about Arturo Alfonso Schomburg’s life. He was born in 1874 in Cangrejos, Puerto Rico, to an Afro-Puerto Rican mother and a father of German ancestry (Holton, 2007). It’s said that, as a young child, Schomburg was told by one of his teachers that Black people had no history, a comment that inspired his work with the New York Public Library later in his life (Valdes, 2017). In 1891, at the age of 17, Arturo Schomburg moved to New York City and became an active participant in the Cuban and Puerto Rican independence movements, working in the masonic lodges with notable nationalists José Martí and Pacin Marin. While he worked with his fellow Latinos for independence, Arturo lived in San Juan Hill, a Black neighborhood on the west side of Manhattan. There he met and married Elizabeth Hatcher, an African American woman, with whom he had three sons (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2010). Some scholars credit his proximity to Black Americans as the catalyst for his later work during the Harlem
Renaissance. However, the actual catalyst for this shift was his work with the Prince Hall Masons, which led him to meet civil rights activist John Edwards Bruce and to become heavily involved with a community of African American intellectuals (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2010). When the United States took control of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898, the liberation movements disbanded, and Arturo shifted away from lodge work. He co-created the Negro Society for Historical Research in 1911, became the president of the American Negro Academy in 1920, and collected what at that time was the largest collection of artifacts from the African diaspora (New York Public Library, n.d.b).

Some scholars view Schomburg’s shift in priorities from independence to the African diaspora as an effort to “exile himself from the Boricua community because he felt more at home among African Americans” (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 254), but that’s not true. As evidenced in the books he collected, the articles he wrote, and the translations he provided between English and Spanish throughout his life’s work, it’s clear that Schomburg never disavowed his identity as an Afro-Borinqueño. Rather, his work expresses a “quintessentially Boricua doubly bound racial articulation, in which Blackness is not necessarily Black by U.S. standards, and what appears White is not necessarily White by U.S. standards, but race and racism are nevertheless the definitive concerns” (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 254).

An Afro-Latinx person in New York City at that time could expect to encounter the same kinds of segregation that Black Americans did, a fact sometimes overlooked by leaders in the movement who were not people of color. Jose Martí famously stated that in a liberated Cuba “there would be no Blacks and Whites, ‘only Cubans’” (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2010, p. 70). While this argument was meant to inspire unity, it also implied a color-blind nationalism that was not representative of the lived experiences of Afro-Latinx people like Arturo, who lived in a city that was divided by the color line (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2010). As Hoffnung-Garskof (2010) wrote, Schomburg believed that “African American institutions in the United States would offer the best structure for achieving freedom and equality for” those of African American descent in both the U.S. and Cuba (as cited in Holton, 2007, p. 232). Thus, his move to African American scholarly pursuits reflects less of a shift in alliances and more of a clarification of Arturo’s already long-held intersectional beliefs.

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Schomburg's Archives

Arturo Schomburg's most significant contribution to modern scholarship is his archives. Stemming from a desire to uplift Black scholarship and prove his childhood teacher wrong, Arturo Schomburg was an avid collector of the books, pamphlets, menus, manuscripts, and artwork of Black authors and artists. It is important to note that this collection was not centered solely around the Black American experience but, rather, included various examples of artwork from the entire African diaspora, including his fellow Afro-Latinx people. While he was not the first scholar to suggest the connection with those of the Black diaspora, Schomburg's archival project was nonetheless “an important site of Afrodiasporic cultural memory, [which] . . . provided a pedagogical foundation for contemporary Black internationalist politics and for subsequent political, cultural and intellectual efforts” (Holton, 2007, p. 221). His personal collection made him an “invaluable resource for such important scholars and writers as W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Alain L. Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Eric Walrond, and Claude McKay” (Valdes, 2017, p. 2), and his Brooklyn home was frequented by visitors. In 1925, Schomburg sold his collection—104 crates containing more than 5,000 books, 3,000 manuscripts, 2,000 etchings and paintings, and several thousand pamphlets—to the New York Public Library for $10,000 (New York Public Library, n.d.a). This donation became the “seed library” for the modern Schomburg Center, which currently houses more than 11 million items that shed light on the richness and beauty of global Black history, arts, and culture (New York Public Library, n.d.c). Through these archival materials, Schomburg's legacy lives on today.

Schomburg's Writings

In addition to being a remarkable collector, Schomburg was an avid writer who used many of his written works as an opportunity to further his archival goal of uplifting Black people and scholarship. In his 1913 address to the teachers' summer class at the Cheney Institute, entitled Excerpt from Racial Integrity: A Plea for the Establishment of a Chair of Negro History in Our Schools and Colleges, Schomburg addressed the lack of consideration given Black scholarship in the university curriculum. He was “not [trying] to revolutionize existing standards, but simply to improve them by amending them so that they will include the practical history of the Negro Race from the dawn of civilization to the present time” and “inspire us to racial integrity” (Schomburg, 1913, p. 5). Schomburg argued that Black people should seek to uncover their common history as part of the African diaspora, writing that “the Negro must strive to follow in the good example of the Jews—they cling to their customs and traditions, no matter whether they live in [Timbuktu] or in the highest peaks of the Andean Mountains; they cling together and uphold the maxim that ‘in unity there is strength’” (Schomburg, 1913, pp. 6-7). Drawing parallels with the Jewish diaspora, Schomburg argued for unity among the people of the African diaspora, who he said should strive to hold on to their own cultural traditions and customs, regardless of where they currently live. In Schomburg's view, the meeting ground for international Black unity is not the practice of common traditions but, rather, an understanding of international Black history (Holton, 2007, p. 222). To construct that meeting ground, that space for international Black unity, Schomburg argued for the formation of “a course of study in Negro History and achievements” and set the foundation for the Black studies movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Schomburg, 1913, p. 6). In another important piece of writing, Arturo Schomburg advocated for the study of Black history and the reframing of traditional historical narratives to include Black contributions. In his 1925 piece, “A Negro Digs Up His Past,” Schomburg wrote that “the Negro has been considered a man without history because he has been a man without a worthy culture” (p. 670). Schomburg argued that scholars traditionally lack understanding of Africa's “true role and position in human history and the early development of culture” and, moreover, that mainstream scholarship either neglects Black contributions to history or regards their contributions as “exceptional,” unfairly disassociating those contributions from the group (p. 670). Schomburg directs us to pay attention to what we deem as worthy of collection and reminds White historians that their racism is causing large chunks of history to be erased. The need to recover this history is crucial: Schomburg argued that “the recovery of Black history will lead to liberation from the ‘social damage of slavery,’” and that “the subjugation and manipulation of knowledge” allow the legacy of slavery to continue (Holton, 2007, p. 228). In other words, decolo-
nizing history may be the only path to liberating Black youth from the legacy of slavery. The need to reexamine history is vital, as it provides Black youth with the "spiritual nourishment of [their] cultural past" (Schomburg, 1925, p. 672). This theme of sustenance or, as he phrased it, "spiritual nourishment" is often repeated throughout Schomburg's writing, thus illustrating his point that an archive of Black history is not only important but absolutely necessary to Afrodiasporic subjectivity and the future of Afrodiasporic peoples (Holton, 2007, p. 219). Without an archive of Black history, Schomburg argued, the spirit starves.

Comparing Schomburg to Antiracist Activists

Significantly, Arturo Schomburg's arguments align with the goals of many antiracist educators in the United States. The goal of contemporary antiracist educators is to confront the "White dominant culture" that has historically shaped "educational structures and policies [and controlled] how students are expected to behave, communicate and interact" (Osta & Route Chatmon, 2018, para. 3). Antiracist educator and activist Dena Simmons (2019) offered a list of recommendations for teachers to follow to create an antiracist educational space. Her first two recommendations ask educators to "engage in vigilant self-awareness" (para. 3) and acknowledge that racism and White supremacy exist. Her third recommendation calls for educators to elevate narratives that promote the intellectual achievements of students of color. In her 2019 article, "How to Be an Antiracist Educator," Simmons writes:

For too long, we have taught U.S. history devoid of a true depiction of Black excellence and have focused on erasing the truth of racial oppression and uplifting Whiteness. Our curriculum superficially talks about slavery and civil rights (notably, textbook provider McGraw-Hill called enslaved Africans "immigrants" and "workers"), and teaching practices risk traumatizing Black students by enacting mock slave auctions, slave games, and underground railroad games. Alternately, resources such as Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s PBS documentary series on Reconstruction or the New York Times Magazine's 1619 Project provide a comprehensive opportunity to learn and discuss history and race with colleagues and students. (para. 8)

It bears noting that these words mirror the rhetoric of Arturo Schomburg, who highlighted the importance of providing a comprehensive opportunity to learn and discuss history from a non-White-centric point of view. As Schomburg remarked in "A Negro Digs Up His Past," it is this lack of representative history that allows the legacy of slavery to continue (Schomburg, 1925), sentiments Simmons (2019) echoed when she referenced the "racial oppression" inherent in our common core curriculum (para. 8). In another example, Bettina Love, noted antiracist scholar and board member of the Abolitionist Teaching Network, has argued that "the current curriculum is not responsive to [Black and Brown children's] histories, their identities, or their desired future selves" (Haymarket Books, 2020). This process of neglect results in the "spirit murder" of our Black and Brown youth (Haymarket Books, 2020). Love's (2020) use of the term "spirit murder" hearkens back to Schomburg's (1925) calls to reframe history to ensure the "spiritual nourishment" of Black youth. In Love's and Schomburg's work, the White-centric history taught in our schools is doing spiritual damage to Black and Brown youth: for Schomburg, Black people's lack of representation leads to spiritual starvation; for Love, it's spirit murder. Thus, Schomburg's writings align with the antiracist educational frameworks being established by leaders today. By studying Schomburg's writings, teachers who may previously have been unaware of his work can gain valuable insight into the history and interconnectedness of these antiracist movements. Students, too, can benefit from this instruction as part of a CR-S-aligned curriculum. In an English class, for example, students could compare and contrast the rhetorical strategies employed by Arturo Schomburg and contemporary antiracist activists, noting similarities and differences in their ideology and expression.

Racial Identity

A study of Schomburg's life can help facilitate a rich discussion about racial identity and help students develop a deeper understanding of their identities. As Simmons (2019) says, some educators express an "underlying discomfort with talking about race, identity, and difference in our nation's classrooms" (para 1). Simmons continues, "When we shy away from open conversations about
race with young people, we sow the seeds of prejudice by inadvertently sending the message that something is wrong with people from another race” (para 9). Schomburg’s “quintessentially Boricua doubly bound racial articulation” opens up these kinds of important discussions and speaks to the idea that identity is fluid and doesn’t need to be defined by outside perceptions (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 254). As Hoffnung-Garskof (2010) wrote, “Although they frequently face the presumption that one is either Black or Latin@, Afro-Latin@s [like Schomburg] can have experiences and social contracts that link them to both communities. They negotiate parallel, if differently configured, exclusions as they move between Latin American and United States societies” (p. 88). In interrogating the multiple worlds Schomburg’s identity encompasses, students can gain valuable insight into the intersections that may be present in their identities and into the various ways society works to elevate or erase these identities. By centering these discussions around prominent scholars of color, educators are doing the work demanded by antiracist activists: reframing history and elevating the narratives of people of color. In this way, teachers can provide their students with the spiritual nourishment that is so necessary for children’s development.

An Archival Project

Students should work to create their historical archives as part of a yearlong exploration of community and identity that builds on the work of Arturo Schomburg. In the 1970s, scholar Michel Foucault developed the theory of the archive:

The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor [in] the historical a priori and the archive do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not withdraw at the same pace in time, but shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale. (1976, pp. 145-146)

Foucault notes that the archive is not just a collection of historical documents but, rather, a method of organizing and assigning significance to historical materials, allowing some to shine brightly like stars and others to fade away into obscurity. In a nutshell, an archive acts as a record of the history that society wants to remember. Even though he predated Foucault’s theory, Schomburg’s efforts to archive Black history “exhibit an awareness of the relationship between power and the archive that Foucault identifies” (Holton, 2007, p. 226).

Since artifacts are assigned cultural and historical significance through the process of archival work (Foucault, 1976), there is no better way to reframe our educational priorities than by putting our students at the center of the discussion. An archival project does just that. Students in an English class could submit their short stories, music, essays, poetry, pamphlets, artwork, or magazines to a class archive, which could then be presented to the greater school community. While there is a place for the standard five-paragraph essay, our curriculum too often reverts to these more traditional, White-centric expressions of mastery as being appropriate for academia and ignores the value of creative forms of expression. My 11th graders lament the fact that school feels like it’s all about tests. With the SAT, the ACT, and the Regents looming, I can’t blame them. By allowing students to submit pieces from a variety of genres, a class archive has the potential to disrupt this notion, thereby allowing the learning to be student-centered and telling students that their work is worthy of being remembered and showcased.

This archival project could easily be expanded to allow students the opportunity to explore their communities. As suggested in 5 Steps for Liberating Public Education from Its Deep Racial Bias, offering activities that invite students to explore their communities and identities can “counter the effects of pervasive racial stereotypes and reduce stress in students of color;” as well as “reassure students about who they are and protect their sense of academic belonging” (Osta & Route Chatmon, 2018, para. 11). This ultimately leads to greater engagement and more positive academic
outcomes for students of color (Osta & Route Chatmon, 2018). An archival project would allow students to collect artifacts that highlight the beauty and richness of their communities. Teachers could send their students out into their neighborhoods to search for items to add to the community archive. Students could interview residents of their community about the history of their neighborhoods, collect pamphlets or menus from local businesses and restaurants, or get involved with local politics. Students could possibly even share their work with the Schomburg Center. Imagine how empowering it would feel for students’ work and community research to be validated as items of historical significance that will be remembered for future generations. By elevating and uplifting all marginalized voices and experiences, this project would expand on Schomburg’s goals and allow his legacy to continue to have an impact on future generations.

Conclusion

Arturo Schomburg’s life and writings offer a wealth of opportunities for educators looking to develop an antiracist curriculum, strengthen their students’ critical literacy skills, and transform their classrooms into student-centered, antiracist spaces. Intentionally or unintentionally, the U.S. education system still espouses racist values and produces racial inequities that negatively impact students of color. Simmons (2019) references numerous studies that illustrate this point, like the 2018 Southern Poverty Law Center study that recorded 3,265 incidents of hate or bias in the fall of 2018 alone, or the Federal Commission of School Safety report that showed that students of color are more harshly disciplined than White students (Simmons, 2019). The data are staggering and the need for reform is urgent. As New York City educators look for ways to incorporate CR-S-aligned pedagogy and revitalize our school system to become one that promotes justice, healing, joy, liberation, and spiritual nourishment for all scholars who are Black, Indigenous, or other people of color, a study of Arturo Schomburg’s life, and specifically his archives, is a promising first step.

References


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Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Classroom Practices: A Home Remedy for the Classroom

Abstract

As a teacher in the biggest public school system in the United States, I found myself struggling to incorporate culturally responsive and sustaining education (CR-SE) into my special education classroom practice. I was curious about how other special education teachers in the same city who had similar students were tailoring their lessons to include CR-SE. Were they also struggling to create effective lessons that students could engage in? Or was I the only one feeling alone and unsupported when it came to creating a CR-SE environment? I created a study whose participants were all graduates of the New York City Teaching Fellows certification program. I focused on finding answers to three main questions: How are other teachers applying CR-SE in their special education classrooms? Has it been effective? What evidence do they have to support their results? I found three common trends showing that teachers continue to need support when it comes to implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom: time, expectations, and accountability. Feeling this was not enough to help me, I continued to search for more answers. I eventually concluded that, in order for students to achieve their full academic potential, teachers first need to learn and practice how to construct and maintain empathy and inquiry in their classroom. These two ingredients together serve as the perfect “home remedy” to create a strong foundation for a CR-SE classroom for any beginner, intermediate, or veteran teacher.

Keywords: culturally responsive and sustaining education, CR-SE, special education classroom, empathy and inquiry, home remedy

Introduction: A Home Remedy for the Classroom

When people hear the term “home remedy,” they likely think of something holistic, natural, or organic. Home remedies are universal—all country and every culture has its own home remedies for treating sore throats, back pain, dry hair, etc. They are passed down from generation to generation because they are effective and can make people’s lives easier. As educators, we can also create our own “home remedy” for improving our pedagogy. My home remedy for teaching consists of only two ingredients: empathy and inquiry. With some reflection and practice, each of us can find these ingredients easily because we have them within us. In this article, I describe how providing empathy and inquiry can create a classroom environment in which all students and their families can learn about, maintain, and promote cultural awareness.

Background

I am a graduate of the New York City Teaching Fellows certification program. I currently teach in an elementary school in the South Bronx, where my focus is on special education. During my years at the school, several questions have echoed in my mind: How can I generate and maintain culturally responsive and sustaining education (CR-SE) in my special education classroom? How can I raise awareness among teachers and administrators who are struggling to provide CR-SE?

Looking back at my earlier career, I realize that I did not focus on CR-SE as much as I should have. Years ago, when I was teaching preschool children, my main focus was on their social-emotional skills—on how I could help them feel comfortable in a setting that did not include their parents, on
teaching them how to express themselves with their peers, and helping them make friends. Above all, I had to make sure my students were safe.

When I taught grades 2-4, my main focus shifted. My students were older and were expected to reach certain goals and standards, so my lesson plans now targeted academics. I created and practiced strategies that would raise their reading levels and their standardized test scores. However, I quickly noticed that these older students still did not know how to communicate their feelings, frustrations, and emotions. They also did not realize that they had a voice of their own. I thought this would be the perfect time to embrace and embed CR-SE in my classes.

However, I soon started to think about New York State’s new learning standards and pictured my students taking the state tests in just a few months. I felt utterly stuck and guilty. Was it more important to spend class time trying to incorporate their histories and cultures into my curriculum or to focus only on academics in order to support my fourth-grade students who were reading at the kindergarten level? Or was there a way for me to balance both?

**Methodology**

Feeling defeated, I contacted some of my previous classmates who were now teachers in various schools across New York City and invited them to participate in a study.

**Essential Questions**

I asked my classmates questions such as, How are you including CR-SE in your classroom? Has it been effective? What evidence supports this? However, my main question was whether there is a clear-cut way to include CR-SE in a special education classroom, one all teachers can benefit from. If so, what do those benefits look like?

**Setting**

As an educator-researcher, I have often used other teachers as resources to improve my own pedagogy. After observing the teachers in my school, I realized that I still needed more support on how to incorporate CR-SE into my special education classroom. I needed to see the different strategies other special education teachers were using without negatively affecting the academic side of the curriculum. I contacted some of my former classmates from the teaching fellows program who were now teaching in grades K-12 across New York City. My criteria for the study included the following: the participants had to work in a Title I public school and be a graduate of the teaching fellows program; I needed at least one participant from each borough and from ICT, 12:1, and 8:1:1 classroom settings. An ICT classroom is an environment in which a general education and special education teacher work together to provide instruction and support in a class that includes students with and without disabilities. A 12:1 and 8:1 classroom has either 12 or 8 students, one full-time certified special education teacher, and one paraprofessional. From June to October 2020, I met all the participants one-on-one via Zoom and Google Meets, as COVID-19 prevented us from meeting in person. In November 2020, I held two in-person sessions where the participants got to meet one another and discuss the trends I had found in the study.

**Observations**

I wanted this study to be reader friendly so that any teacher, new or veteran, could easily understand it. I decided to concentrate on the three most common factors that had emerged about what is happening in the classroom: time, expectations, and accountability.

1. **Time:** Eight of the 12 participants responded that they did not have much time to deliver the CR-SE part of their lessons, so they tried alternatives, such as assigning culturally responsive activities as homework. However, not all students did the activities. The most common reasons for that were a lack of materials, support at home, and motivation.

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2. **Expectations:** Ten of the participants stated that their school administrators had said they expected the teachers to connect academic learning to their students’ lives outside the classroom. They expected students’ cultures and communities to be addressed in the lessons. The remaining two participants stated that the only time they were encouraged to practice CR-SE was in their training programs and in professional development activities outside of school; their administrators and new teacher mentors who provide content and curricular support never mentioned that CR-SE was part of their expectations and it was not reflected much in their school communities.

3. **Accountability:** All 12 participants said they had not been held accountable for including CR-SE in their classrooms. Even if their administrators and mentors did expect them to address CR-SE, they were not rated on it during classroom walk-ins and observations.

**Discussion**

The eight participants in my study who taught in ICT or 12:1 classroom settings stated that they struggled with incorporating CR-SE into all their lessons, due to having limited time during school hours to plan. The remaining four participants who taught in smaller class settings (8:1) struggled with delivering lessons rich in CR-SE because they had to focus more on behavior and routines in their classrooms. In fact, 3 of the 12 participants did not know how to begin incorporating CR-SE in the classroom because their school offered no clear examples of what it should look like. They were unclear as to whether or not the texts, materials, and activities they had planned were aligned with the expectations that New York State had for CR-SE. Moreover, most of their students were non-verbal and had multiple disabilities, and the participants observed that these students had a harder time participating and engaging in the lessons. This lack of communication made it harder for the teachers to learn about their students’ family cultures. Therefore, the participants said their first aim was to prepare their students with basic skills, such as mastering phonics, improving their spelling, and making sure they could compare numbers. Many participants said they felt obligated to focus on these skills when they noticed how far the special needs students lagged behind their classmates. Unfortunately, they felt that they failed in increasing identity safety in the classroom.

Michelle Novelli (2019, p. 3) stated that “culturally responsive teaching was not prevalent, even in diverse public school settings, due to curricular or other constraints. Results of this study revealed a need for culturally responsive teaching to be intentionally interwoven through several semesters of pre-service work and practicum experiences.” This led me to reflect on my training during the fellows program. I attended every class, took notes, and made sure to apply the strategies discussed in my classes. My classmates and I felt supported by our program. So why were we still struggling with CR-SE?

I decided to keep exploring this question. I initially believed success with CR-SE was dependent on the particular situation, including the teacher, students, and school. After these visits, I kept thinking about the convenience of home remedies. In classrooms, teachers have to find strategies and tools that work for them. Similar to the way we are in the kitchen, we have a variety of recipes to choose from and we can always change them up to improve the outcome. At this moment, I created the theory that home remedies have a critical place in the education system and that there is in fact a way that CR-SE can be used successfully by all teachers. When we use home remedies, we use what we have at home and mix it together to improve our well-being. When we incorporate CR-SE into a lesson, we use all of the identities in the classroom and find a way to enrich the curriculum and learning experience for the students. I observed that, when educators show empathy and apply inquiry in an education setting, both students and educators can benefit. After analyzing and reflecting on my own personal experience and the observations I made, I learned that a curriculum that includes these two ingredients enables CR-SE to occur seamlessly.

**The Role of Empathy**

CR-SE comes into play when a teacher invites students to learn more about one another’s racial, cultural, and linguistic characteristics. But before practicing CR-SE, a teacher must first know what
it is. CR-SE promotes cultural awareness and helps students maintain their cultural integrity and celebrate who they are. Of all the responsibilities teachers have, I argue that the most important is to demonstrate empathy in the classroom. As Hoffman writes (2000, p. 3), “Empathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible. It may be fragile but it has, arguably, endured throughout evolutionary times and may continue as long as humans exist.”

Some of the teacher participants stated that the COVID-19 pandemic and teaching virtually had made it significantly harder for them to empathize with their students. I observed one virtual fourth-grade class where it was clear the teacher was feeling this way. When I joined her class on Google Meets, I noticed that most students had their cameras off although she repeatedly asked them to turn them on, which a few students did, but only for a minute or two. I could see her growing frustration in her facial expressions. After the meeting, I spoke with the teacher. She said that teaching remotely had made it harder for her to empathize with her students, and after observing her class, I understood completely. However, from my personal experience, I knew her frustration stemmed from more than students not turning on their cameras.

In a physical classroom, I know that my students have the equipment they need—notebooks, pencils, etc.—but in a virtual classroom, my expectations must be different. I have to be flexible and expect that my students do not all have the same materials. Feedback is another element missing in the virtual classroom, which can make teachers feel disconnected. In my physical classroom, I can observe the progress my students are making and give them feedback on the spot, but giving feedback during virtual instruction was very difficult for me. I was able to create separate virtual rooms where I could interact with students one-on-one, but this took twice as long as in a physical classroom. Moreover, when I returned to the whole class, some students had logged off or turned off their cameras. When this happened, I felt as overwhelmed as the teacher I had observed.

I later observed a third-grade teacher at her school who found it quite easy to empathize with her students during the pandemic. I compared this lesson and the student engagement to the previously mentioned fourth-grade lesson. There were some evident differences: most students in the ELA class had their cameras on and everybody seemed to be engaged with the class. The teacher read the book *Outside, Inside*, by LeUyen Pham, which revolves around people who came together to live through the COVID-19 pandemic. The teacher stopped and asked questions after every page, such as, “How did you feel the first day you heard about the pandemic?” “How did you react when you found out schools were shut down?” “Does this remind you of somebody you know?” When the lesson ended, I asked the teacher, “How did you empathize with your students today? Did you plan for it? If so, how?”

At the end of the first class I observed, I knew students’ names but only heard some of their voices. In contrast, by the end of the second class, I felt like they were my own students. I learned how many of them had immigrant parents, how many were bilingual, and even about some of their home traditions. And I learned all this just by observing the teacher’s practice of empathy. Her questions, her text selection, and the way she delivered her lesson reflected how much effort she made to bring empathy into her classroom. From an outsider’s point of view, this teacher was a success.

Earlier I stated that time was one factor that prevented teachers from planning and delivering lessons that incorporate CR-SE. Yet I had just witnessed how this teacher incorporated CR-SE in her ELA lesson from beginning to end. She did not think of CR-SE as a separate strategy or tool. After years of attending trainings and professional development sessions, she expressed genuine interest in her students’ backgrounds; in some discussions she acted as a facilitator rather than an instructor. She had high expectations for all her students, and she welcomed their different opinions on the pandemic. By showing empathy with her students and talking about her own difficulties with remote learning, they learned to do the same. She seemed to instinctively know that, before she could have a successful lesson in which she targeted standards, she had to establish a community in which showing empathy played an integral part.
The Role of Inquiry

This teacher's practice of empathy showed me how effective it can be in a classroom. My observations made me curious and raised certain questions: How long did it take her to get to this point? How did she know that the text she chose would be an excellent conversation starter? Where did she learn these strategies? I became aware that I was beginning the inquiry process, something we all go through when pursuing questions. It enables us to reflect on our professional practice and is a kind of intentional research that aims to deepen our knowledge and expertise. The process may vary, but the goal remains the same: to improve our instruction and our students' academic skills.

One of the most important responsibilities teachers have is to collect data on their students and use it to guide their instruction and the implementation of CR-SE. One of the tools we use at my current school to collect literacy data on our students is I-Ready, a program that can be accessed by any student who has a device such as a laptop, computer, or tablet. Teachers can manipulate which lessons students complete on I-Ready, which depends on the data that have been collected. The beauty of working with other teachers is that no two teachers will look at data the same way. When my team and I discuss data on a particular student, we all bring our personal experiences to the table. For example, if student K's scores show that she is reading two years below grade level, we will ask different questions. For example: Did student K get enough sleep the night before the diagnostic? Did she eat a nutritious breakfast that morning? Were the data even accurate? Having seen a direct correlation between students' grades and their eating and sleeping habits, they may have her take the test again right after lunch. Their questions and subsequent action are an example of how teachers can experiment with empathy and inquiry to guide their actions.

Confronted with the same situation, teachers will ask different questions and take different actions, each of us deciding what we feel will best support our students. I am trying to find a balance. How can I use the various data to affirm my student's identity? What does that look like? How does cultural bias influence a teacher's data collection and analysis? What cultural bias do I have that may affect the rigor of my instruction?

Since becoming a teacher, I have often heard the term “scaffolding,” which I initially thought meant making the school work easier for my students. Without conducting much research, I took steps to do just that. However, when my students' academic skills were not improving, I took a different approach. I started to question why the scaffolding wasn't helping my students and whether I was doing it correctly. I needed answers, so I asked other special education teachers, but their students were different from mine and their approaches didn't always work for me. In time I learned that scaffolding does not mean I need to make the work easier for my students but to find ways to support them so they can complete a task successfully. I learned that I can simultaneously scaffold lessons and practice CR-SE. For example, I realized that my students were not understanding the math lessons because they felt no personal connection to the word problems. I now create my own math problems, in which I portray my students' different cultural and linguistic identities.

During a recent conversation with another educator, Olivia, we reflected on whether empathy and data need each other. We know that empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of another, and that it is not tangible. Meanwhile, the data we collect in the classroom are tangible and we are always using them to differentiate and support our students. I said that I am more comfortable allowing empathy, rather than inquiry, to guide my instruction and to create an effective and equitable environment. Olivia argued that empathy and data rely on each other and challenged me to think about what data are and if there is only one form. She helped me to see that data are information and that I rely on qualitative data regularly in my teaching. So, there is a way to use the empathy I have for my students to collect data and then use it to support them.

Combining Empathy and Inquiry

During the 2020-2021 school year, I was able to practice combining empathy and inquiry and to see whether it truly benefited me and my students. We used a mix of virtual and in-person lessons that year, which I used to my advantage. In an effort to create empathy between me and the students’
parents, I included family members in the virtual lessons. When I was reading books, I asked parents in advance if they would like to be guest readers. At first, some were really excited, others were hesitant. Just like my students, once some parents saw others try, it motivated them to try, too. Most important, the students were excellent listeners and tried to help the parents if they struggled to pronounce certain words. Having their family members participate enabled my students to learn patience and to get a glimpse of their various home environments. This strategy promoted a sense of community and gave me the opportunity to practice CR-SE and empathy, even though I was only connected with my students virtually.

As educators, we need to remember that our identities are as important in what happens in the classroom as our students’ identities. As a child of immigrant parents, I reflect on what I loved about my education and what I wish had been better. Each of us has life experiences that enable us to empathize and connect with our students, and teachers who reflect on their upbringing and use lessons learned in their own instruction will likely see an improvement in their class environment. Treating students and their families with genuine warmth, care, and sensitivity will make them feel comfortable and valued enough to take intellectual risks that will benefit them academically and emotionally.

Combining empathy and inquiry is not as hard as it sounds. I believe the hardest part is being aware of when we are doing this and reflecting on it frequently. However, once we are readily able to combine empathy and inquiry, we can start to address the inequities we become aware of in the education system. Most importantly, we can start experimenting to find the best ways to affirm our students’ identities and provide them with opportunities for success.

**Conclusion**

By practicing empathy with my students and their families, I am able to build relationships of respect and rapport. When I practice inquiry, I find ways to improve my students’ learning outcomes. And when I combine the two, I create an environment in which my students feel comfortable embracing and sharing their cultural and linguistic identities. Students learn to love who they are and appreciate the unique characteristics of others, and feel valued enough to bring their own family knowledge and culture into our classrooms. If you are an educator and are ready to try this home remedy, keep in mind that it might not come out perfectly the first time you try it. Learning to practice empathy and inquiry might start out messy, but your trial and error will help you develop the perfect recipe. Have patience and keep trying, because the end result will enable you to give more to your students, their families, and even to yourself as a culturally responsive educator.

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Fishbowl Colonialism: The White Colonial Gaze on the Sound of Black America in Education

Maya Cunningham

Abstract

To counter anti-Black racism in the current post-civil rights movement era and to serve the needs of African American students whose cultural experiences have been historically marginalized in U.S. education (Mustaffa, 2017), schools and school systems should strive to provide culturally responsive and sustaining curricula (Paris & Alim, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). However, when attempts have been made to practice cultural responsivity in English language arts and music education, the result has been an alarming and emotionally charged public backlash (Smitherman, 2006). This article explains this backlash and the resistance to Black sound culture in the classroom by exploring the colonial gaze (Kaplan, 1997) on the Black auditory body. I call this phenomenon “fishbowl colonialism,” which describes how Black American music and language are exploited for entertainment but historically have not been considered worthy of serious study or inclusion in formal education. My aim in this essay is to historicize the stigmatization and subalternity of Black sound culture (Keyes, 2003) and to analyze how this stigma hinders efforts to provide culturally responsive education for African American students. If those who shape educational policy and curricula understand how the fishbowl colonialism of Black sound culture influences education policies, African American language (AAL) and music can be reframed in the classroom as a culturally responsive practice that centers on the culture of Black students.

Keywords: colonialism, Black sound culture, culturally responsive education, African American language, Black music

Introduction

African Americans have been subjected to the Euro-American colonial gaze since 1619 when they were first forced into what would become the United States. The imperial gaze refers to the way the colonial agenda seeks to maintain and legitimize power by determining social realities, including the dehumanization of its subjects and the perpetual separation of Us (the so-called civilized colonizers) from the Other (the colonized) (Quijana, 2000). The white colonial gaze imposed on enslaved Africans took on many forms to ensure continued profits from the enslavement of Black people. This included viewing them as objects, not people, who did their labor and provided their pleasure. The European colonial gaze cast African Americans by law as chattel, therefore non-persons. In the U.S. Constitution, enslaved African Americans were counted as three-fifths of a human being, and were subjected to the colonial gaze of the 19th-century racist pseudo-sciences of craniometrics and psychometrics, as well as extreme sexual objectification and usury (Branche, 2015; Morgan, 2004). In Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body, Harvey Young (2010) comments that “Black bodies, both male and female . . . live[d] an objectified existence within the Western world . . . [and]] in the twenty-first century, continue to share in the experiences of their ancestors who were viewed as ‘other,’ unjustly incarcerated, and subjected to limitless violence” (p. 4). This violence was and is not only physical but psychological and emotional. The colonial gaze was cast not only upon the visible Black body, as scholars including Nancy Hewitt (2002) have often noted, but it has also been applied consistently to the auditory Black body and has ruthlessly violated Black culture.

One aspect of the auditory Black body was Black speech, which included language patterns and the message of words spoken, especially words about seeking freedom, which has been closely monitored from the time of slavery to the FBI Cointelpro (Counterintelligence program) surveil-
lance that destroyed Black leaders during the civil rights and Black Power movements. Auditory surveillance was imposed on African Americans during slavery to such an extent that Black folks developed coded methods of communication, including the double entendre used in spirituals. Formerly enslaved African Americans described having to quiet the prayers and songs they uttered in secret gatherings, called hush harbors, to avoid detection by the patrollers who roved Southern roads (Vol. 3 Florida: 212; Vol. 15 Tennessee: 49; Vol. 16 Texas, Part 1: 199; Levine 2007, p. 42). It is also widely documented that the FBI launched the Cointelpro operation to monitor the words of African American freedom fighters such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Blackstock, 1975). The colonial gaze on the auditory Black body initiated a historical process that has stigmatized Black sounds, especially African American Language (AAL) and African American music. This gaze on Black sound culture has had a direct effect on the education provided to Black children.

Geneva Smitherman (2006, p. 3) defines AAL as “a style of speaking English words with . . . Africanized semantic, grammatical, pronunciation and rhetorical patterns.” Enslaved Africans developed and spoke creole languages that were a mix of African languages and English, which the European colonists labeled “bad English.” In 1774, Edward Long, a British-born colonial apologist and member of the slave-owning planter elite in Jamaica, echoed the Euro-colonial view of Black language with these words:

The Africans speak their respective dialects, with some mixture of broken English. The language of the Creoles is bad English, larded with the Guiney dialect, owing to their adopting the African words, in order to make themselves understood by the imported slaves . . . The better sort are very fond of improving their language, by catching at any hard word that the whites happen to let fall in their hearing; and they alter and misapply it in a strange manner. (2002, pp. 426-427)

Along with the rest of enslaved Africans’ cultures, their language was considered inferior by Europeans. Regarding music, Radono and Bohlman (2000, p. 16) report that through the European slave trade and colonial project, Europeans “othered” groups and associated music with these groups by casting them as ‘savage’ and ‘uncivilized.’ With the rise of social Darwinism, which Europeans used to rationalize colonial exploitation, “foreign musics,” or non-European music, was given a “decidedly inferior status” (p. 16). The idea of European supremacy was codified by the German musicological canon (Bach, Beethoven, etc.), which in the United States was linked with whiteness. Radono and Bohlman also discuss American minstrelsy, which the Irish initiated in the mid-1800s to emphasize racial difference and to project ideas of Black inferiority. In short, ideas about Black music were used to connote racial differences between American whites and Blacks, and the idea of Black inferiority.

One current byproduct of stigmatized Black language is the emotionally charged resistance to using AAL to teach students who speak it to read and speak Standard American English. In 1996, when the Oakland school board passed a resolution that recognized AAL, or Ebonics, as a non-English language to be used to transition its speakers to Standard American English, there was an uproar and resistance from the Black leadership class, such as Maya Angelou and Jesse Jackson (Smitherman, 2006, p. 130). Bill Cosby, extraordinary cultural contributions aside, also was “vociferously oppositional” (p. 8) to the Oakland Ebonics solution. Anna Fay Vaughan-Cooke, a linguist who conducted seminal studies on the language acquisition of African American children, was antagonized by a white interviewer on CNN, who insisted on referring to AAL as “bad English” (Garcia, 2014). During a 1997 news debate on the Oakland Ebonics controversy, Kweisi Mfume, then president of the NAACP, condescendingly said that Ebonics or AAL speakers need to find ways to “bridge out of that into proper English and proper communicative skills” (Garcia, 2014). The hierarchical language continuum, which Edward Long wrote of in 1774 and was codified over the centuries, resounded in the public outcry against Oakland’s Ebonics resolution.

Although all American popular music is essentially Black music (Maultsby, 2015), it has been stigmatized in the mainstream as illegitimate and is not taught in most American music education programs. Of course, stakeholders and decision-makers of music education programs would not officially announce that Black music is not included because they believe that it is inferior to
European-derived traditions. During a 1968 appearance on the *Dick Cavett Show*, James Baldwin made a profound statement that explains how to recognize institutional racism:

> I don't know how most White people in this country feel. But I can only conclude how they feel by the state of their institutions. I don't know if the labor unions and their bosses really hate me, that doesn't matter, but I know that I am not in their unions. I don't know if the real estate lobbyists have anything against Black people, but I know the real estate lobbyists keep me in the ghetto. I don't know if the board of education hates Black people, but I know the textbooks they give my children to read and the schools where we have to go to. Now…this is the evidence. (emphasis added)

A Eurocentric approach to music-making and teaching is reflected in the 2014 National Association of Music Education standards, which have been adopted by most states; New York State and Washington D.C., have also adopted the National Core Arts Standards (Schuler et al., 2014, pp. 41-49). These standards reflect the Eurocentric curricula U.S. music educators are expected to deliver. Even the images they include in these standards, of students playing in European orchestras, reflect the expectation that their music education programs will teach students how to perform the European classical canon (Cunningham, 2019). The fact that Black music is not often centered in school systems’ music education standards like the District of Columbia Public School system that serves a large majority of African American children, reflects the continued effect the Euro-American colonial legacy has on the Black auditory body. As a result, African American students and their sound culture continue to be marginalized in public education.

Both historic and contemporary iterations of the colonial gaze on the auditory Black body create the effect that I call “fishbowl colonialism”—by which I mean that eyes and ears are on Black sound culture to exploit it for its entertainment value but not to consider it worth including in formal educational programs. My aim with this article is to historicize the stigmatization of Black sound culture and to analyze how this stigma hinders the provision of culturally responsive education for African American students.

The Historical Colonial Fishbowl: Misperceptions and Surveillance of the Black Auditory Body

As stated earlier, one aspect of the colonial gaze was slave owners and their agents’ surveillance of the auditory Black body—that is, the sounds and speech of enslaved Blacks. The white listeners surveilled communications between enslaved Blacks in an effort to detect escape plans or resistance of any kind. Their tyranny led enslaved African Americans to develop an audible “hidden transcript,” (Scott, 1990), a covert form of communication that included songs that signaled escape, like “Steal Away” or “Bound for the Promised Land,” which Harriet Tubman sang to let her sister know she was running away (Larson, 2004). The hush harbor tradition established a cultural structure that allowed open speech to occur only in closed cultural spaces that were not surveilled by slave owners or their proxies who might be listening (Cade, 1935; Cornelius, 1999; Ford, 2015).

The auditory colonial gaze was used to argue for Black inferiority because African Americans’ language and music differed from that of Europeans. No document makes this plainer than Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), an entire section of which is devoted to Jefferson’s pseudo-scientific analysis of Africans’ differences and assumed inferiority. He wrote, “In music they [Blacks] are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time . . . [However,] whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of, complicated harmony, is yet to be proved” (p. 147). Jefferson was not the only colonial agent to denigrate Black sound. Linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner (1949, p. 5) reveals that early white linguists regarded Gullah, the language widely spoken by Blacks living on the coastal islands of South Carolina and Georgia, as “partly a survival of baby-talk which the white people, during the early period of slavery, found it necessary to use in communicating with the slaves.” The colonial gaze was also imposed on Black music by outlawing the use of certain instruments; drumming, for example, was outlawed in most states because it was associated with slave rebellions (Radano & Bohlman, 2000, p. 464). European perceptions of enslaved African Americans’ vocal music were also deni-
grating. African Americanist musicologist Eileen Southern documents that the African voice was described as a “rud noyse,’ a strong nasal sound,’ or ‘very loud and shrill’” (cited in Griffin, 2004, p. 106). She further notes that “in these descriptions Black voices are other and foreign. The Black voice is part of the Black body; the Black body was deemed the very antithesis of all that was white and therefore human” (p. 106). The white colonial gaze regarded every aspect of the Black auditory body as inferior.

**The Colonial Fishbowl in Modernity**

European colonization of Black subjects has taken many forms throughout the Western Hemisphere and in Africa, though the methods of colonialism differ by country and region (Potthast-Jutkeit, 1997; Ndaliko, 2016). In some countries, like the United States and South Africa, settler or external colonialism was the primary mode of oppression, starting in the 1600s. (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 4). Ghana provides an example of external colonialism. Ruling from a distance, Britain installed a British governor and exploited the colony’s resources, such as gold and cocoa, using the indigenous population as cheap labor. They manipulated compliance with this system through an education system that taught Ghanaian children to identify with British culture. External colonialism was enforced all over Africa by France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and other European nations (Rodney, 1981). While many of these colonial techniques were used against Africans in America, including historically exploiting them for cheap labor and colonial education, the oppression differs because the United States is a settler colony. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012, p. 5) give a salient definition of the way settler and internal colonialism operates in the United States:

The other form of colonialism that is attended to by postcolonial theories and theories of coloniality is internal colonialism, the biopolitical and geopolitical management of people, land, flora, and fauna within the “domestic” borders of the imperial nation. This involves the use of particularized modes of control—prisons, ghettos, minoritizing, schooling, policing—to ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white elite. These modes of control, imprisonment, and involuntary transport of the human beings across borders—ghettos, their policing, their economic divestiture, and their dislocatability—are at work to authorize the metropole and conscribe her periphery. Strategies of internal colonialism, such as segregation, divestment, surveillance, and criminalization, are both structural and interpersonal.

I expand on Tuck and Yang’s analysis by considering the particular kind of colonialism Blacks have been subjected to in the United States because “settler colonialism operates through internal/external colonial modes simultaneously because there is no spatial separation between metropole and colony” (p. 5). The 2010 Census reports that the United States has a majority (60.1%) Euro-descendant population and a comparably small (13.4%) Afro-descendant population, thus it is curious that African American sound culture is so prevalent in U.S. popular culture. This is not by happenstance. Blacks have not been subjected to a distant gaze, but to one that is immediate and inescapably up close—a minority contained by colonial rulers in a ‘fishbowl.’ African American sound culture, particularly music and speech, is highly visible, and it has been exploited by U.S. media, corporations, and white audiences, while at the same time Black Americans remain highly controlled and marginalized through the specific process that I call fishbowl colonialism.

**Fishbowl Colonialism through Minstrelsy**

A fish in a bowl is on display. The glass magnifies the onlooker’s view of the fish, but the fish in its container does not have the same magnified view as its audience. This reflects African Americans’ experience of colonialism in the United States, through white minstrelsy, which demeaned and mocked Black speech and music. Minstrelsy, which emerged in the 1830s, was the first popular American entertainment. White minstrel performers, both men, and women, performed what they viewed as Black difference and inferiority to whites (Lott, 1992; Wynter, 1979; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2019). They performed in blackface, with exaggerated white or red lips, and wore wigs resembling Black hair, all to mock Blacks’ phenotypical
differences from whites and to portray Black features as ugly. These degrading performances extended to African American traditions, their foodways, and dance, and especially, Black sound: African American instruments, singing styles, and speech (Lott, 1992; Arceneaux, 2005: p. 65). White minstrels developed their performances by watching and listening to Black Americans. Those they ensnared in their colonial fishbowl were often servants or African Americans in subordinate positions. Lott (1992) describes the colonial gaze of white male blackface minstrels who rose to fame in the 1800s:

T. D. Rice used an old black stableman’s song and dance in his first “Jump Jim Crow” act. Dan Emmett . . . learned to pat the infantry drum from a man nicknamed “Juba” . . . Appearing as a banjo player in various circuses, Emmett very soon teamed up with the dancer Frank Bower, who had learned his dances directly from black men . . . Stephen Foster no doubt had contact with black wharf workers and boatmen in his hometown of Pittsburgh, but according to his brother, he experienced black church singing firsthand through a family servant, Olivia Pise, who was a “member of a church of shouting colored people.”

In this example of fishbowl colonialism, Rice, Emmet, and Foster demeaned Black music and danced with their strange compulsion to imitate it. The fact that these imitations made the entertainment careers of these white men demonstrates their power over the Black people that they mimicked, and how their misinterpretation of Black sound culture stigmatized it publicly.

James Weldon Johnson (1912) offers an example of fishbowl colonialism in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. He describes a club in the early 20th century where Black singers, instrumentalists, dancers, and actors often performed. Unfortunately, the club served as a colonial fishbowl for whites, as Johnson explains:

Almost every night one or two parties of white people [visited the club], men and women who were out sight-seeing, or slumming. They generally came in cabs; some of them would stay only for a few minutes, while others sometimes stayed until morning. There was also another set of white people who came frequently; it was made up of a variety performers and others who delineated “darky characters”; they came to get their imitations firsthand from the Negro entertainers they saw there. (p. 51)

T. D. Rice and the performers who played “darky” characters had the power to misrepresent Black people and their culture on the public stage, and later in film. These misrepresentations concretized a demeaning view of Black speech and music in the dominant culture.

Blackface minstrel performances later appeared on radio, film, and even television. Through minstrelsy, Black language came to signify to the white mainstream a lack of intelligence, just as Black music, as Jefferson asserted, represented a culture that was inferior to whites. The demeaning of Black music and speech is exemplified in the popular blackface minstrel radio programs, which rose to popularity in the 1920s. Arceneaux (2005) documents that minstrel shows were present from the earliest years of radio broadcasting. A stereotyped “black dialect” which was referred to as “blackface talk” or “racial ventriloquism” (p. 63) was used to connote the visual image of blackface performers; parodied Black speech was used to depict negative stereotypes of African Americans: “To white audiences, African Americans were perceived as simple and unsophisticated . . . this perception of Black culture was wrapped up in stereotypes” of Blacks as lazy and uneducated (p. 65). Minstrel radio actors codified these ideas through a specific kind of comic performance. Using parodies or stereotypes of AAL, minstrel actors, performing as Black stereotypes, would mock women (Black women), marriage, and joke about “stealing chickens, gambling and drinking.” After this, they would deliver a “serious talk riddled with mispronounced words” (p. 65). Two episodes of the Jack Benny Show, in 1936 and 1942, concluded with a “blackface parody of Romeo and Juliet” (p. 65). This form of minstrelsy linked ideas of Black inferiority with Black speech, which they stereotyped by deliberately mispronouncing words that did not conform to the grammatical rules of AAL.
Black music was similarly denigrated. The banjo, which derived from West African culture, was played widely by Black Americans (Linford, 2014), but was "first popularized by 19th-century blackface acts" (Arceneaux, 2005, p. 63). White minstrels on the radio played the banjo to reinforce negative Black stereotypes. A radio series called Plantation Nights was "based around spirituals and gospel songs" that harkened back to the "earliest days of minstrel shows" (p. 63). The show was promoted as re-creating an "old southern plantation where the darkies come to serenade the owner" (p. 63). The long-running Aunt Jemima series, the "quintessential version of the mammy stereotype . . . featured traditional minstrel songs and blackface dialect" (p. 64) that the white minstrels ridiculed.

Even more disturbing is how blackface minstrelsy had a multi-generational influence. The initial primary audience was older white men (Arceneaux, 2005: p. 63) but expanded to include white males and females of all ages: "Blackface entertainment was not only seen as non-offensive but as wholesome and acceptable for all ages. 'I believe there is no finer, cleaner humor than that contained in the old-time minstrel shows,' wrote Dailey Paskman [radio program director of the 1920s] (1927)" (p. 67). Perceptions of Black inferiority vis-à-vis stigmatized Black sound culture was calcified in the minds of whites, young and old alike, by engaging in these minstrel performances. These audiences gazed upon misrepresentations of Black culture in the colonial fishbowl of radio and every other area of American society. As documented by the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia of Ferris State University, minstrel images of Black America permeated every part of American society. The stigmatizing message about Black people and their culture, even though it was misrepresented, became a part of United States popular culture. Arceneaux argues that "by the 1920s, minstrelsy had already influenced so many aspects of popular culture that it began to fade into the background; its influence defied precise definition" (p. 68). This was hegemonic societal structuring at work. Degrading images of Black Americans, which were particularly defined by the ridicule of African American vernacular language and music, were pervasive and present in all visual media, including advertisements, sheet music, postcards, product packaging, household objects, and of course, radio, film, and television. The degradation of Black people and Black culture defined United States society, and African Americans had little power to fight against it and stop it. African Americans were inescapably caught in U.S. popular cultures' colonial fishbowl and subject to the white American gaze. Speaking as an African American, I do not know how my forebears could stand it and maintain positive cultural esteem. In many cases, they could not, as we will examine later.

These depictions contributed to the hegemonic structuring of American society whereby European American culture was seen by the American public as “high,” and African Americans (and Africans) and their culture were seen as “low.” Even more specifically Black sound culture, through “blackface dialect” and stereotyped performances of African American music, was placed in a low-status category in comparison with Standard American English (and perhaps also British English) and European classical music and literature, which were upheld as hallmarks of intelligence and sophistication. This is evident in American societal structures. European music forms, like the European classical music canon, were presented in formal venues like symphony halls, state-funded arts platforms, and theaters (Struble 1995). These structures formed an economy for instruction in Western music that would be applied by students who became professional performers of the Western classical tradition. In the same way, the commercial forums that presented minstrel representations of Black sound culture also formed a supply and demand economy for such performances. This is why Black performers who wanted professional work were forced to wear blackface and perform minstrelsy. The economy for true forms of African American music performed by African American musicians, like gospel music, for instance, was much smaller and primarily located within African American communities. While a more in-depth analysis of this is beyond the scope of this paper, my point is this: societal hierarchies that exalted European sounds, music, and speech and degraded African American music and speech dictated what has been historically viewed as accepted and proper in formal education settings.

While it is impossible to review the curriculum of every school system, one only needs to look at the National Core Arts Standards concerning music, and how they are represented in the following
and derivative documents to understand the value placed in formal education on European classical music. The National Core Arts Standards primarily emphasize mastery of Eurocentric “music proficiency” skills at the primary level in preparation for orchestral ensembles at the secondary level (www.nationalartsstandards.org). These values are also reflected in the so-called “Mozart effect” (Swaminathan, Nikhil, 2007) that has driven the cottage industry of books, CDs, and videos like “Beethoven for Babies: Brain Training for Little Ones,” which claim that early exposure to the European Classical canon makes children smarter and contributes to their brain development. Other than a recent and highly problematic study by Dr. Jessica Phillips-Silver, on how polyrhythms of African American gogo music, a funk style, can accelerate brain development (Lefrak, 2020), little attention has been given to exploring the “brain development” effects of African American music or other cultural traditions. Hegemonic societal hierarchies explain where these elements of Black culture, especially Black speech and music, are placed (or rather excluded) in formal classroom settings, and why discussions of including them in curricula for Black students provoke such a strong reaction from the public.

### The Effects of the Colonial Fishbowl on American Education

The fishbowl colonialism targeted at African American culture has deeply shaped public debates and policies concerning the education of Black American children. Let us first focus on the effects of fishbowl colonialism on English Language Arts educational policies for Black children through the lens of the 1996 Ebonics controversy. The Oakland school board passed the “Ebonics resolution” in an effort to correct the lower reading and language arts scores, and grade scores of their African American students. The resolution stated the following: “standardized tests and grade scores will be remedied by the application of a program with teachers and aides who are certified in the methodology of featuring African Language Systems principles in instructing African-American children....” The resolution ignited a national controversy that culminated in a United States Senate hearing because it cited Ebonics as a non-English language spoken by a large number of the district’s African American students, and resolved to train their educators to teach students Standard American English as a second language using AAL. The backlash was against recognizing AAL as a valid language, or language system. This backlash was wholly informed by the minstrelizing of the language. In the end, the school board was not able to do as it wanted, regardless of the linguistic experts who advocated for their approach.

One of these linguists was Dr. Ernest A. Smith (1975), who played a significant role in shaping the Ebonics resolution. He defines African American Language (AAL) as West/Central African Niger-Congo grammatical patterns, combined with English vocabulary (Smith, 1975, pp 77-85 and 1998). The term “Ebonics” was coined by psychologist Robert L. Williams (1975). The word is a combination of the word ‘ebony,’ meaning black, and phonics, meaning ‘sounds’—black sounds. Ebonics is a term that a group of linguists, led by Dr. Williams, used to define all Africanized languages of the Western Hemispheric African Diaspora, including “the various idioms, patois, argots, idiolects, and social dialects of Black people” (Williams, 1975, p. vi).

The term *U.S. Ebonics* refers specifically to the language variety spoken by persons of African descent in the United States (Alim, H. S., & Baugh, J., 2007, p. 35). Dr. Smith (1975, 1998) argues that the difference between *U.S. Ebonics*, AAL, or AAVE (African American Vernacular English), or all other derivative names for Black American speech, and Standard American English is the African influence—an African influence that the Oakland school board wanted their teachers to consider when teaching their Black students English Language Arts. Tracing back at least fifty years of linguistic study, Smith shows Ebonics’ basis in West African languages (“A Lesson in Ebonics” 1997). Dr. Smith states that human beings learn the language in the environment in which it is spoken and heard. To the extent where Black people have been living in social isolation, Black sounds are a linguistic continuation of Africa. This is the foundation to understanding AAL—it not only journeys back to the time when Africans first came into the country through slavery, but it also speaks to isolated African American language communities in the contemporary. Smith cites the Gullah/Geechee communities of Coastal South Carolina and Georgia as an example of an isolated language community.
Building on Smith’s conclusions, I further contend that isolated speech communities that speak specific varieties of African American English exist in areas where there are high, single ethnic group concentrations of African-Americans (Bailey and Maynor, 1987), like the Marshall Heights section of South East Washington D.C. where I taught for many years. Thus, in the case of an AAL speaker in an isolated language community on Hilton Head Island in 1820, on a Delta, Mississippi plantation in 1908, in the Harlem section of New York City in 1930, in Brownsville, Chicago in 1950, or in Marshall Heights, Washington D.C. in 2020, Smith argues that whenever the speaker of one language (an African language like Wolof or AAL) attempts to speak a target language that is structurally different from his own, (Standard American English) there is a tendency of the mother tongue to interfere with “intrusions.” These are also called “interference modifications” or “transfer phenomena.” The mother tongue interferes and modifies the target language where it is structurally different, phonetically, morphologically, and syntactically (Elesije, 2015). Dr. Smith discusses these structural differences in depth. He says that African Niger-Congo language groups, from which AAL is derived, have a “consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel” phonetical pattern (“A Lesson in Ebonics,” 1997). He also says that West African languages do not have consonant cluster configurations. For instance, the -st consonant cluster is not present. Therefore, “west, best, test and fast become wes’, bes’, tes’ and fas’.” Likewise, the -ld consonant cluster is not present. Therefore, in AAL, “cold and hold become col’ and hol’.” He also makes the point that some languages, like Arabic and West African languages, do not have the verb “to be,” which is the auxiliary or copula verb (Elesije, 2015 and Vaughn-Cook, 1998). Speakers of these languages morphologically express thoughts using an equative clause, which is formulated as “topic – comment.” Dr. Smith explains that the underlying concept of nomo explains why the ‘to be’ auxiliary verb is not present in West African languages. Nomo means that when you speak, you bring something into existence. Therefore, an example of common parlance in AAL might be “Where yo’ Mama,” which exempts the ‘to be’ copula verb. Or “Yo’ Mama, she col’,” exhibiting the “topic-comment” West African syntactical structure in AAL, and the absence of the -ld consonant cluster (Elesije, 2015). Although there is an extensive analysis of West African structures in AAL, including many West African language vocabulary retentions documented by linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner (1949), the ones stated above are enough to understand that the “deep structure” of AAL does not follow the English language as its phonetical, syntactical and morphological root.

Dr. Williams and Dr. Smith conducted and published their research in order to “remove the stigma that the language our kids speak is a deficient language” (A Lesson from Ebonics, 1997). Their goal, which is reflected in the language of the Oakland School Board’s Ebonics Resolution, is to ensure that the “70 percent to 90 percent of African American children who speak Ebonics” be taught that the language they speak is a “legitimate linguistic heritage instead of being placed in remedial English classes” (1997). They argue that for schools not to do so is “discrimination against African American children” (1997). I agree. The Oakland School Board, Smith, Williams, and other linguists like Dr. Anna Faye Vaughn-Cook (1998) were all pushing against a stigma that had long been placed on AAL, from slavery to minstrelsy through fishbowl colonialism.

The raging backlash against the Oakland resolution was a consequence of the way Black speech had been historically stigmatized. “Blackface talk” mocked, misrepresented, and defamed the morphology, syntax, and lexicon of AAL that the school board intended to use to bridge their students to speaking and reading Standard American English, which is often referred to as the Language of Wider Communication (LWC) (Smitherman, 2006 p. 6). The very West African “transference phenomenon” that Dr. Smith discusses had come to be used as a comic relief that signified negative African American stereotypes to the point where Black speech indexes to many as Black intellectual inferiority (Elesije, 2015). Such significations were intentionally constructed, written into radio and film scripts, and have been extremely damaging. The content of the most popular, longest-running, and influential minstrel radio show (turned television show) Amos and Andy demonstrate just why many ridiculed the concept of Ebonics as a valid language system worthy to be used in formal classroom instruction (Arceneaux, 2005, p. 6).
From my own survey of the *Amos and Andy* radio show, which ran from 1928 to 1960, I learned that the stories took place in Harlem, an area of New York known for its high African American population. It always featured Amos, Andy, and another character named Kingfish engaging in foolish, ill-thought-out, and unintelligent activities. Always. Their foolish doings were linked to the parodied AAL that they spoke. The white minstrel actors who played these characters, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, most prominently emphasized in their spoof of AAL either the absence of the ‘to be’ auxiliary or copula verb or the varied uses of it, like “I is,” “I’s” or “ain’t.” They also featured the West African phonetical pronunciations—the absence of the ‘r’ at the end of words like ‘your’ and ‘sure’ pronounced as ‘yo’ and ‘sho’. Also, all characters pronounced words like cold, that, and fast as col’dat, and fas’.

Aside from the *Amos and Andy* show, other examples are numerous, including the “Jim Crow” character and scene in the 1941 Disney film *Dumbo*, *The Gold Dust Twins*, *Sinclair Weiner Minstrels*, *Jack Benny Radio Show*, and *The Jazz Singer* film with Al Jolson’s grossly offensive blackface minstrel performance. These media outlets cemented minstrel parodies of Black speech as an unfortunate standard in American humor. The Africanity of Black speech that has been mocked by minstrel performers has resulted in many in the Black professional class who distance themselves from AAL because, to the white mainstream, it signifies Black inferiority and unintelligence. Some Blacks in the leadership class, like Bill Cosby, have openly declared disdain for African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and its speakers (Smitherman, 2006, p. 8). However, most Black professionals distance themselves from AAL, and negative associations with Black language by simply speaking only Standard American English or intentionally code-switching to only speak AAL at home or informal settings, and speaking Standard American English in integrated or predominantly white workplace environments (Young, 2014 and Myers, 2020).

**Educational Policies Against African American Language**

The stigmatization of Black speech explains the resistance to the efforts to use AAL in instruction before the Ebonics controversy. Even when successful Black linguistic programs were created, they were quickly dissolved. An example of anti-Black resistance to Black language in urban school settings manifested in the SEEK program. The SEEK program (Search for Elevation, Education and Knowledge) was designed in 1971 by linguist-educator Carol Reed and her colleagues who were a part of the Language Curriculum Research Group at Brooklyn College in New York. They launched SEEK to teach students writing skills by contrasting the differences between the students’ AAL and the language required for college writing (Smitherman, 2006, p. 6). Smitherman asserts that SEEK was “the most creative and educationally sound language education program for AAL speaking college students that has ever been developed” (p. 6). Unfortunately, the program, although highly successful with New York Black students, was short-lived because of the backlash against the program by the NAACP, led by Roy Wilkins. *The Crisis*, the NAACP’s news organ, called AAL the “English of the undereducated,” and the program “black nonsense” of “extreme black cultists and their pale spineless sycophants” (p. 6). Their reaction is the result of the fishbowl colonial historically imposed upon Blacks because they accepted the idea reinforced for years by minstrel stereotypes that Black language is inferior to Standard American English. Several years after this, in 1977, three mothers of AAL-speaking students filed a lawsuit that is commonly known as the “Black English case” or the *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children, et al., v. Ann Arbor School District Board, 1979*. The Ann Arbor School district was proven to be guilty of language discrimination against the students. Teachers had labeled the Black students in the case as learning disabled i.e. intellectually inferior because they spoke AAL. The operations of colonial fishbowl once again.

The emotionally charged reaction of many white politicians, news reporters, and Black community leaders to the Oakland Ebonics controversy, that erupted almost twenty years after the “Black English case,” can only be explained by the historical stigmatization of Black speech. Most reacted by issuing several charged and blatantly disrespectful statements about AAL or Ebonics during the 1997 Ebonics and Education Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearings,
or in heated public statements, news program debates, and condescending news articles written by white journalists. Several testifiers at the Senate hearings demonstrated especially disrespectful attitudes and negative emotions towards AAL. Given the history of certain white men who ridiculed Black speech for the entertainment of white audiences, it is no surprise that Senator Lauch Faircloth demonstrated his language prejudice towards African Americans and AAL during the Ebonics Senate hearings by loudly calling Ebonics “absurd” and the Oakland resolution “political correctness that has simply gone out of control” (CSPAN, 1997). Equally disturbing were statements given by two Black American community leaders during the 1997 Ebonics Senate hearings. Rev. Amos Brown, Civil Rights Chairman of the National Baptist Convention, announced that the organization's board of directors “unanimously voted not to support the concept of Ebonics.” Armstrong Williams, a Black conservative journalist and media personality, called the Oakland resolution a “misguided approach to education.” The impassioned statements from both men were marked with high-volumed speech at certain points and animated gestures to the point where Rev. Brown spoke in an almost sonorous sermonic cadence. Both men labeled African American Language as “broken English,” “bad English,” “bent speech,” and “substandard speech.” Williams went as far as to compare AAL or Ebonics to an illness. He also compared using AAL in teaching methods for African American students to “talking down” to students. He pathologized AAL by comparing its use in the classroom to “teaching math by showing the teacher can make mistakes in subtraction and addition” and comparing it to a teacher “smoking marijuana” to relate to teen drug addicts. Both men clearly saw AAL as a cultural deficit that Black children have to overcome, not as a language heritage to be respected, valued, and appreciated. As mentioned earlier, Kweisi Mfume, the president of the NAACP at the time of the Ebonics controversy, expressed that if the Oakland school board had proposed to teach Ebonics, then it would be a “cruel joke” and that AAL speakers must “find ways to bridge out of that into proper English,” implying that AAL is improper and bad (Garcia, 2014). These Black men have internalized the view of Black language as inferior. They are victims of the fishbowl colonialism of minstrelsy and have adopted its gaze on their own heritage, which led them to help to block funding for bi-lingual education for African American students. In my opinion, based on these case studies, and my experience in the classroom, many Black children are still underperforming in the area of English Language Arts because their home language AAL is not included in their curriculum. This issue is still not resolved.

**Stigmatization and Educational Exclusion of African American Music**

Based on the National Arts Core Standards, African American music has been largely omitted from school curricula in the same way as Black language (www.nationalartsstandards.org). This is not a coincidence since it has been similarly stigmatized. The hegemonic power of white minstrelsy is demonstrated by the fact that de-contextualized blackface minstrel songs, as opposed to actual Black music, were included in music education curricula (Ermolaeva, 2019). Black music also has the same stigma as Black language in formal classroom settings. Minstrelsy, and negative journalistic writing, created a false narrative about Black music that in the public mind, blanketed the true narrative of Black music. While there are many examples to draw from, one particularly illustrates this point. The style of jazz known as be-bop was developed by Black American musicians like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Kenny Clark, and Max Roach. They were creative geniuses that innovated bebop by drawing from earlier forms of African American jazz and other music styles like the blues. The advent of be-bop was revolutionary. But like other elements of Black culture, it was misrepresented in mainstream American popular culture. The music style and the musicians were parodied in the “Be-Bop” toy from the 1950s, which is featured in the Jim Crow Museum of Ferris State University. The toy depicts a black man in a bright yellow suit, standing on a round platform. The figure performs a tap dance kind of motion when the platform is turned. The name of the toy is printed on a box: “Be-Bop - The Jivin’ Jigger” (Carpenter, 2019, p. 3). “Toys like this, along with blackface stereotypes posed in parodied Black dance movements on sheet music of minstrel or ‘coon songs,” set a precedent for the common view of Black music as invalid, illegitimate, and not worthy of serious study (Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture).
From my own experiences as an African American student, longtime music educator, and now ethnomusicologist, I have firsthand knowledge of the way standard American music education promotes European hegemony and marginalizes the African American experience. African American music is an oral tradition (Burnim and Mauldsby, 2006). However, the music education programs based on the National Arts Core Standards that I have observed in New York City and Washington D.C. are designed to prepare students to perform in the written Western European Classical tradition. This tradition occupies a hegemonic top place in American society, is robustly supported by state arts budgets, and is given a central place in university music programs and cultural arts institutions throughout the country. The “El Sistema” instructional model out of Venezuela is a program that was developed to teach Venezuelan students European classical orchestral music. Baker (2014) reports that it has been replicated around the world, especially to teach Black and Brown children European classical music. These programs are well funded in the United States, and completely exclude African American musical traditions. Despite the high praise such programs receive, the centering of the European classical tradition and marginalization of African American music damages Black American students.

Deejay Robinson (2018) discusses the damage he experienced as an African American in music education programs, and as a music educator, in the book chapter “Black Keys on a White Piano: A Negro Narrative of Double-consciousness in American Music Education.” He integrates a first-person narrative of his story as a music student in high school and college. Essentially, like many Black folks, Robinson’s first musical experiences were with the gospel music of the southern African American church. Remembering the emotion of his grandmother’s singing in church, he was drawn to formally study music because of his love for gospel. Upon joining the gospel choir, he observed that all of the other student members were also African American. A teacher noticed that he had a strong tenor voice and encouraged him to audition for the chamber choir. This is when he discovered just how marginalized African American music traditions like gospel are in music education programs. When he arrived at the auditions, he was expected to sing in the Western operatic tradition, sight-read Western notation, and sing in various European languages. Because this was an oral tradition that requires a different musical skill set, he was not prepared for the chamber choir audition. As he observed the preparedness and success of his white counterparts, many of whom had been trained from their youth in the written tradition of Western Art music, he began to internalize feelings of racial inferiority. From the chamber choir, he matriculated into a Western-centered undergraduate vocal program, for which he was not prepared. Consequently, he struggled in his course work, especially in ear training and music history courses, which were all centered on the Western art tradition. He struggled with feelings of inferiority and felt stigmatized because he was the only Black student in his program. Robinson used DuBois’ double consciousness theory (1903) as an analytical tool to dissect his experiences. My question is, what if Robinson had an early culturally responsive music education that privileged the orality of his African American music tradition, and that was centered on his cultural experience? Could he have developed a strong “self-consciousness” that would have allowed him to understand the Africanity, and validity, of the African American oral tradition that he was raised in?

**Righting the Wrongs: Possible Solutions**

Perhaps the solution to the exclusion of African American language and music from schools that serve Black students is to destigmatize both. One way to do that is to teach the history of Black sound culture, the rich traditions of African American music and speech, and the way it has been historically denigrated and marginalized in the United States through fishbowl colonialism. Towards this goal, I advocate creating a culturally responsive pedagogy based on socio-linguistics research, linguistic studies of African American English, and ethnomusicological research in Black music. Also, the work of education scholars like Janice E. Hale will undergird these efforts with her rich body of knowledge on African American learning styles based on Black orality in her work *Unbank the Fire: Visions for the Education of African American Children* (1994). Drawing from Hale, and social science research, the teacher preparatory programs, as well as the professional development workshops set forth to do this work will help to destigmatize Black
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Dreaming Beyond Boundaries: Reimagining the Role of Black Mothers in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Abstract

Black women have historically informed educational theory and practice. As Black women who have been nurtured and sustained by Black women’s educational leadership both inside and outside the home, and who mother and “othermother” Black children, we seek to recognize and honor the labor of Black women. Motherwork, a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins, refers to the “reproductive labor” that women of color engage in to ensure the survival of family, community, and self. Black women center their motherwork on Black children by asserting their knowledge and experiences as related to teaching and learning. In this paper, we explore Black mothering as culturally sustaining pedagogy. We also reimagine and dream about our Black children’s possibilities for learning. Through this work, we seek to center Black mothers as knowledge bearers and guides for building and sustaining Black children’s brilliance and culture. We contend that Black mothering should be of foremost consideration in developing culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Keywords: Black mothering, culturally sustaining pedagogy, motherwork

Introduction

Historically, Black women have modeled how to teach students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds effectively, including Black and Brown students (Dillard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000, 2005; McKinney de Royston, 2020; Muhammad et al., 2020). Moreover, Black women have been the guiding lights in educational theory, often bridging the gap between critical theory and educational practice. Black women such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, Linda Darling-Hammond, Lisa Delpit, and Geneva Gay have left an indelible mark on teacher education, and on the field of education more broadly. Ladson-Billings, for instance, with William Tate (1995), is credited with introducing critical race theory (CRT) in the field of education. Among her many achievements and contributions as a scholar, Ladson-Billings (1995) is responsible for conceptualizing culturally relevant pedagogy, which today is a foundational framework in the field of teacher education (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017; Seriki & Brown, 2017). Scholar Gay (2018) introduced culturally responsive teaching to inform teaching practice for all students, particularly minoritized students. Culturally relevant teaching and culturally responsive pedagogy are both examples of pedagogical and theoretical frameworks born by Black women that have shaped and informed educational theory and practice. Nevertheless, teacher education remains a largely white domain in terms of both the teaching population and the lauded theorists.

In teacher education, Black theorists, and Black women specifically, are centered primarily in individual multicultural education courses, while white male theorists such as Vygotsky and Dewey are lauded as foundational thinkers in the field (Muhammad et al., 2020). Muhammed et al. (2020) have noted the many Black women who have been leaders in educational justice but have failed to be recognized suitably for their manifold contributions to the field. Black feminism and womanism, however, do acknowledge the power and tradition of Black women in education, by making a direct connection to home life (Dillard, 2006; Dillard & Neal, 2020). Dillard and Neal (2020) describe the care Black women educators give: “Students were embraced, supported, disciplined, and loved through the eyes and arms of a Black mother” (p. 375).
As Black women who have been nurtured and sustained by Black women’s leadership in education both inside and outside the home, and who mother and “othermother” (see Wilson, 2010) Black children, we seek in this paper to recognize and honor the labor and expertise of Black women, especially Black mothers.

As Black m(other) scholars who have devoted our professional lives in the fields of education and counseling to dismantling racial, gendered, and other oppressions, the boundaries of our personal and professional lives are blurred. The coalescing of our work as university faculty members, educators, and Black mothers forces us to contend with how the work of Black women is often compartmentalized, and our mothering knowledge is pushed to the periphery. In this paper, we reimagine and dream about our Black children’s possibilities for learning and seek to center Black mothers as knowledge bearers and guides for building and sustaining Black children’s brilliance and culture.

Black Motherhood as Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

As noted above, Black women’s scholarship has had a profound impact on shaping our understanding of how to teach Black children most effectively. In her pioneering book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) delineated the ideological and pedagogical underpinnings reflected in the successful teaching of Black children. This work was followed by another piece in which Ladson-Billings (1995) clearly delineated a theoretical framework for culturally relevant pedagogy. Drawing from this work, and the works of Gay (2000) and Paris (2012), has led us to consider how educators might move beyond being relevant and responsive to students’ cultures to being more intentional about valuing and maintaining the cultural and linguistic traditions of minoritized communities, thereby sustaining these practices even as they morph and change. Paris (2012, p. 93) describes culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) as seeking to perpetuate and foster—that is, to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. She argues that, “in the face of current policies and practices that have the explicit goal of creating a monocultural and monolingual society, research and practice need equally explicit resistances that embrace cultural pluralism and cultural equality” (Paris, 2012, p.13).

We argue that what Paris describes as CSP is constitutive of Black mothering practices and, thus, Black mothering should be used to inform how educators conceptualize and engage in CSP. As the primary caregivers of Black children, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, sisters, and other-mothers play a central role in teaching them the values and skills that often are absent from their mainstream schools. If CSP is meant to sustain “linguistic, literate and cultural pluralism” (Paris, 2012) by drawing from students’ home cultures, who better to inform that work than the individuals who regularly cultivate young people’s growth in their homes. In Table 1, we outline the role of motherwork (Collins, 1994) as a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). We elaborate on these ideas by presenting vignettes that demonstrate how we experience the relationship between motherwork and CSP in our own lives, and concretely illustrate the central features of motherwork as CSP. Table 1 displays the correlation between motherwork and CSP.

Centering Black Mothers as Knowledge Bearers and Embracing Our Motherwork

Black mothers develop culturally sustaining practices through the socialization that results from their daily exposure and proximity to cultural practices; however, Black mothers also engage in more intentional educational practices with the explicit goal of sustaining their communities rich cultural practices. Jackson and Remillard (2005) broadly define education as “planned opportunities for learning, and consider the ways that parents [involve] themselves in these opportunities for their children” (p. 67), which is reflected in the “ways that parents work to structure, foster, and support their children’s learning in a variety of contexts, not just those that are related to school” (p. 68). Chonika, for example, a second-generation American of Afro-Jamaican heritage, cultivates her children’s use of Standard American English, African American English, and Jamaican Patois. Sustaining the languages and cultural traditions of one’s communities involves using them regularly
| **Motherwork**  
(Collins, 1994) | **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**  
(Paris & Alim, 2017) | **Motherwork as CSP** |
|---|---|---|
| **Motherwork as Survival:**  
Black mothers see mothering as a commitment to the survival of Black children, and by extension the community and themselves. | **CSP as Survival:**  
By extending theories of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies, CSP argues for the need to sustain students’ cultural norms and values. In this way, it is a pedagogy of survival that ensures the longevity of Black and Brown people’s epistemologies. | The primary goal of Motherwork is to ensure the physical survival of Black children and their intact and healthy identities as Black people in a racist, anti-Black world. Motherwork promotes survival in the face of systemic physical dangers that threaten Black bodies, and also the “spirit murdering” that happens to Black children in mainstream institutions like schools (Love, 2019).  
Example: Fostering educational experiences that build up rather than tear down our Black children; disrupting the sole use of summative assessments as the precursor for measuring growth and development. |
| **Motherwork as the Reclamation of Power:**  
Motherwork helps Black children and communities gain agency through active means of resistance and empowerment. | **Adapting to the Shifting Culture of Power:**  
Young people must be culturally flexible and adapt to shifts in the culture of power. CSP supports the development of diverse cultural repertoires and access to power in evolving cultural spaces. | Motherwork reflects Black children’s need to maneuver through a variety of cultural spaces and to resist oppressive forces that insist on ethnocentrism at the exclusion of Black people and other minoritized groups. Motherwork also teaches Black children how to integrate their cultural norms and practices into mainstream spaces.  
Example: Fostering linguistic diversity and flexibility with Jamaican American children, including Jamaican Patois in a U.S. school space. |
| **Motherwork and Identity:**  
Motherwork is central to the development of the healthy coping mechanisms and identities Black children need to thrive and maintain a positive sense of humanity and personhood. | **Grounding Identities in Equity:**  
CSP recognizes those who have been damaged and had their identities erased through schooling. It recognizes that identities are ever evolving and critiques cultural practices that are not aligned with principles of equity while promoting those that advance equity. | Motherwork provides the foundation upon which Black children build their identities. This disrupts the ways that schools limit narratives of representation that allow Black children to see themselves, their histories, and ways of being as exceptional.  
Example: Fostering positive racial and cultural identity development through representation and understanding the contributions of influential Black trailblazers. |
in the home and in community spaces. It also involves deliberately inhabiting spaces where those languages and cultural traditions are practiced, such as visiting other countries, attending local cultural festivals, and participating in local programs like the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools where African American English is used throughout the curriculum. When Chonika's children's school was making banners, each carrying the phrase “Make peace prevail on earth” in one of the languages represented at the school, she asked that they include one in Jamaican Patois. This was her way of bringing her own historically minoritized language into the mix, an example of how parents can broaden the range of languages deemed acceptable in the formal school context.

Chonika, whose middle-class Afro-Jamaican family resides in a majority white community due to career constraints, has few opportunities to speak African American English and Jamaican Patois in her children's school and other community spaces. For her to cultivate these aspects of her culture requires deliberate planning, but she knows that nurturing her children's language skills will enable them to navigate a variety of communities and to merge those communities and cultures when necessary. It also will help them build a sense of pride in their heritage and push back against deficit notions of minoritized languages. This type of home-based practice, like teachers in mainstream educational spaces who engage in CSP, helps students develop cultural competence, critical consciousness, and a positive sense of self, all of which have implications for Black children's overall well-being and academic success (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995). It is through these kinds of learning experiences that Chonika's daughter Chloe has come to recognize and articulate the need for justice, as she expresses in a piece of artwork painted in the colors of the Black Liberation Flag (see Figure 1). Without prompting, Chloe created her painting in the midst of a global pandemic, and in a time of numerous police shootings and extrajudicial killings of Black people. The homeplace, a term bell hooks (1990) coined to describe the protective spaces Black women create in which Black children can experience joy and also grapple with the realities of being Black, is cultivated through motherwork. The homeplace provides a space for freedom of expression that can result in the kind of spontaneous artwork Chloe produced—her beckoning call for justice.

A term coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1994), motherwork is the “reproductive labor” that women of color engage in to ensure the survival of family, community, and self. As Black women embrace and embody various aspects of their motherwork, they must negotiate in and through spaces to protect their children and assert that their knowledge and experience are central to teaching and learning. As they negotiate “intersectional and institutional structures of patriarchy, sexism, anti-black woman and girl racism, and classism, and . . . strive for . . . [their] own and . . . [their] family's wellness” (Richardson, 2019, p. 25), Black mothers also serve as guiding lights in disrupting stereotypes about Black people.

Writing as the Black-m(other)-scholars of students who often attend predominantly white school districts, we share realities that require a deep connection to our motherwork. By centering our focus on motherwork, we facilitate the protection not only of our biological children but of Black children collectively, including those yet to come, that embraces the funds of knowledge stemming from Black mothers’ work to re-envision the teaching, learning, and protection of Black children’s minds and bodies.

Although parents play a crucial role in their children's education and often are the most knowledgeable about their own children, Black parents are rarely included in the decision-making concerning the education system (Cooper, 2009; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Powell & Coles, 2021; Williams et al., 2017). Moreover, when Black parents are included, it is often from a deficit perspective that positions Black parents as uncaring and apathetic about their children's education and schooling (Powell & Coles, 2021). Such deficit perspectives are further perpetuated by dominant stereotypes of Black mothers as “loud and uneducated” (Powell & Coles, 2021, p. 77), mammies, welfare queens, and sexually promiscuous (Collins, 2000). The origins of these stereotypes go back to the enslavement of Africans in the Americas when caricatures of Black women were socially constructed as a way to control and maintain the subordination of Black bodies (Collins, 2000; Richardson, 2019). In challenging these dominant narratives of Black mothers, Black feminists and womanists have long upheld the wisdom of Black mothers (Collins, 2000; Dillard & Neal, 2020). Much like
the erasure of Black women’s contributions to the field of education, Black mothers are not valued for their knowledge about teaching Black children. Even though Black women have contributed tremendously to the field of education, how their contributions connect to their Black mothering and motherwork (Collins, 1994) has yet to be fully recognized.

Black children have been situated historically and presently at the core of oppressive systemic and structural realities. Love (2019) posits that the “education survival complex” has taken on various forms, including test-taking requirements, grit labs, and character-education models. Black and Brown children must navigate these structures, which perpetuate rather than ameliorate educational disparities. The realities of the survival complex require a level of engagement from Black mothers that involves intentional, thoughtful, intense, and emotional racial socialization to combat the implications of systemic and structural barriers in schooling spaces (Adams-Bass & Coleman-King, 2020; Collins, 1994; O’Reilly, 2004). The oppressive ideologies at work in public school systems across this country are reflected in “colorblind” educators who fail to acknowledge white privilege and remain unaware of the prevalence and effects of discriminatory practices that directly harm Black families (Cooper, 2010).

Despite these obstacles, Black mothers have found ways to connect with and support each other, even during the schooling realities resulting from COVID-19, and to create and sustain communities in which Black and Brown children feel loved, protected, and understood. In environments where Black children might be perceived as threats or expendable misfits who are not core members of the community, Black mothers must think strategically about how to protect their children from the weight of existing in a system not built with them in mind. These tensions are also reflected in what is deemed “developmentally appropriate” in educational spaces as early as pre-K. This misunderstanding of Black children becomes a point of contention in navigating the overwhelming emphasis on test-taking and summative forms of assessment even as early as kindergarten. Black boys, in particular, have been, and continue to be, misunderstood in PreK-20 classrooms. Educators often misconstrue their learning styles and social skills as problematic when, in fact, Black boys are simply not receiving forms of discipline, academic instruction, and peer-interaction opportunities that suit their learning needs (Skiba et al., 2011).

Taryrn reflects on an experience with her six-year-old son, who had just received his first graded math assignment since beginning face-to-face instruction in the kindergarten classroom:

Son: I guess I am not smart or too good at math since I didn’t score well on my math test.

Taryrn: Son, you are smart, you are brilliant, and a test score doesn’t dictate your intelligence.

At this moment, Taryrn’s motherwork was challenged, as an individually orchestrated school test had shaken the bold confidence her son had shown just a few weeks earlier when he first entered the classroom. In just a matter of weeks, the reality of Taryrn’s six-year-old son’s schooling experiences had become apparent. It was clear that rigid testing and a didactic curriculum were inhibiting his natural proclivities and leaving little time for how young children learn best—through hands-on experimentation and play.

As a teacher educator and mother-scholar, Taryrn understands children’s need to sustain their natural connection to learning through play, and she has relied on that knowledge to guide her embodied motherwork. Dreaming about Black children's teaching and learning realities confronts significant tensions in common assessment strategies of even our youngest minds, which often resemble high-stakes testing that saps ingenuity, creativity, and active learning from K-12 schooling spaces. Embodied motherwork involves dreaming of spaces where conscious and informed teachers observe Black and Brown children, engage them, and analyze their work in formative ways. This is the type of learning space Taryrn envisions for her child and all Black children—a space that centers, sustains, and taps into the brilliance and creativity of our youth. Taryrn shared another experience that took place during her morning drive to school with her son. In this brief but intimate time, Taryrn was reading pages from the book 28 Days: Moments in Black History that Changed the World, by Charles R. Smith Jr. This made the ride to school an opportunity for her son
to learn about influential figures in African American history, including Crispus Attucks, the first man killed in the Boston Massacre, which helped to spark the Revolutionary War, to Madame C. J. Walker who, after years of adversity, became the wealthiest Black woman in the country. During these morning rides, Taryrn read her son these stories of Black resilience and engaged him in conversations about the extraordinary contributions made by Black people.

A couple of weeks after Black History Month, Taryrn’s son, who had secretly been working on a unique art project, presented his interpretation of 28 Days: Moments in Black History that Changed the World. In his illustrated book, he reimagined the images from the original and captioned them using information he had learned about each key figure. Taryrn listened in awe as he read each of the pages and described the likes of Malcolm X, Althea Gibson, Matthew Henson, Daniel Hale Williams, and Martin Luther King Jr. His illustrations captured the very essence of how he felt learning about historical figures that looked like him. Taryrn’s son’s use of language also demonstrated his understanding of civil protest and of the challenges many of those he learned about had had to face as they made their marks in history. In fact, emboldened by these role models, he asserted to her that policymakers needed to “change the [rules] of the bus” so that everyone could sit where they pleased (see Figure 2). Through his mother’s embodied motherwork, Taryrn’s son was able to see himself on the shoulders of the giants that he had learned about during their rides together, and he learned to see himself as a creative and visionary author who, at six years old, drafted his own version of an important text.

Taryrn’s embodied motherwork enabled her to cultivate and sustain a space in which the possibilities for her son are endless. By dreaming of and creating opportunities and spaces that enable him not only to survive but to thrive, she had tapped into the highest form of learning. A space that makes way for creation in its most organic and natural sense allows children to be true to who they are in the most affirming way. Creating this kind of space centers Taryrn’s motherwork as CSP.

A Black Mother’s Resistance and Future Dreaming

In centering our motherwork, and the intense realities of deeply rooted marginalization that Black children contend with in traditional schooling spaces dominated by Whites, Black mothers have embraced the practice of homeschooling as a form of resistance, protection, and what we suggest in this work is a form of Afrofuturism, imagining and creating a reality for Black people beyond what currently exists (Capers, 2019; Hill, 2000). Amid the realities of COVID-19, and in light of the longstanding disconnect between Black students and their K-12 schooling, many Black mothers are reimagining the possibilities for their children’s learning, digital instruction in particular. This reimagining explores possibilities for centering learning that serves as an act of affirmation while simultaneously disrupting systemic racism embedded in today’s schools (Fields-Smith, 2009). In the current realities, motherwork has guided opportunities to create new social networking spaces that will enhance bonds and promote collaborative teaching and learning among Black parents and families that have used the homeplace as a space where Black children can thrive. It also enables Black mothers to channel the narratives and histories of Black people in a way that demonstrates for their children the lineage and the shoulders they stand on in their own learner identities. The envisioned possibilities driving the motherwork of Black women are enabling them to create new opportunities for teaching and learning.

Structuring an education system that operates from a space that affirms Black children’s intelligence and their right to be in the world will require an expansive reimagining. Dreaming of a space in which our children feel safe must harken back to the voices that dreamed of safety as Black families strove to gain their freedom. We must keep an ear open to the voices that have supported us as we consider the future of Black education (Warren & Coles, 2020), including a pedagogy that does not continuously harm Black children (Dumas, 2014). Creating an education system that is culturally responsive, affirming, and sustaining will require dreaming of a space that counters the deficit stereotype and promotes the physical, psychological, and educational safety of Black children. These dreams will have to expand beyond present-day frameworks that position Black children as outsiders within and beyond the formal K-12 schooling experience (Capers, 2019; Daniel et
al., 2020; Warren & Coles, 2020). Structuring such places will call upon all educators to share the dream, for the sake of the very survival of Black children.

Daniel et al. (2020) describe the utility, implementation, and education of the community school movement in New York City as envisioned by those who are most harmed by existing policies and practices. They posit that the dreams of those who have been harmed include an invitation to families and communities of color to both imagine and serve as the leaders of these school systems. Steps forward will include forming what Bryan et al. (2020) define as school-family-community partnerships. These partnerships are an extension of models that have been guided forward by the imaginings and visions of Black mothers, who are often at the center of resistance and exhibit a will to stay the course for our children's education, even as stories of the harm done to Blacks continue. These stories are rooted in and reflect the history of racial segregation and limited access to educational resources in the United States (Baker, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Massey, 2016; Monarrez et al., 2019). Shaping the hopes and dreams for the future of our Black children requires knowledge of where we have been, awareness of current barriers, and the audacity to shape a freer future (Capers, 2019). Creating safe school spaces that are culturally responsive and sustaining will require that Black families and communities serve as leaders in all of those spaces.

The steps we take moving forward will require grappling with the past and the future in ways that both affirm and strengthen our Black children's personhood and educational possibilities. Taking action will require leadership that counters the deficit narratives that have harmed and continue to harm Black children in the schools (Dumas, 2014). This work will require us to bear witness to the realities Black children face in the current educational system, to dream of better possibilities, and to use our agency to resist schooling that reinforces the status quo. To create culturally sustaining spaces, we will have to explore what safety means for the children and communities most seriously harmed by systemic injustice (Daniel et al., 2020). Black women's motherwork should be the cornerstone of such efforts to practice CSP. Through the work of Black mothers, and the communities we represent, we are empowered to dream of and embrace practices that support education spaces that are safe and equitable for Black children.

Endnotes

1 Grit Labs

2 The community school movement values the strength and knowledge of survivors of oppression and supports collaboration between community stakeholders, educators, organizers, and students, blurring the lines between school and community.

References


FIGURE 2.

“CHANGE THE [RULES] OF THE BUS” - DORIAN BROWN, AGE 6


Dr. Chonika Coleman-King is currently an Assistant Professor of Teachers, Schools, and Society at the University of Florida, where she prepares students to take up critical issues in their work as educators and scholars. Her teaching and research center on issues related to race, class, gender, and immigrant status, and their impact on education. Dr. Coleman-King’s research interests include the development of culturally responsive and anti-racist teachers, experiential learning, urban education, and the experiences of Black immigrant and Black American youth in U.S. schools. Dr. Coleman-King is the author of the book, The (Re-)Making of a Black American: Tracing the Racial and Ethnic Socialization of Caribbean American Youth, which documents the complex interplay between race, class, and immigrant status for Afro-Caribbean immigrant youth, and the role schools and families play in students’ racial and ethnic identity development.

Dr. Taryrn T. C. Brown is currently a Clinical Assistant Professor of Social Foundations at the University of Florida. Her teaching and research broadly examine the interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives of education, both inside and outside schools. With an emphasis on the experiences
of marginalized individuals and communities, much of her work emerges from the intersections of race, social class, and gender. Her interdisciplinary work also seeks to promote critical questions that challenge deficit positioning and the standard assumptions about the purpose of schools in a democratic society, in particular the roles race, class, and gender play in teaching and learning. Her current research and scholarship as a scholar-practitioner focus on Black feminism, Black girlhood studies, and intersectionality.

Dr. Latoya Haynes-Thoby is currently an Assistant Professor of Counselor Education at the University of Florida. Her work explores the benefits of trauma-informed and culturally relevant counseling. As such, her research focuses on individual and community healing from trauma, including community-rooted factors that promote resilience. Her research agenda is brought forth through applied research methods and includes the exploration of culturally specific factors that contribute to resilience and success. Her research aims to broaden what we understand about resilience and to promote human thriving within community, school, and career counseling settings.

Dr. Tianna Dowie-Chin is an Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at the University of Georgia. She graduated with a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Florida in 2021. Before pursuing graduate education, she worked as a secondary school English and history teacher for the York Region District School Board in Ontario, Canada. She has developed a multipronged research agenda that broadly examines race in education, with a particular focus on Black feminist thought and education, fostering critical race approaches to teacher education, and challenging global anti-Black racism in education through race theory.
Featured Artwork

My Dreams Will Come True
By Anastasia Enriquez

Truly seeing myself in what I am learning means to me, that I am worthy and that I can reach all of my dreams. The world around me will be like a garden of colorful flowers, where I get to grow and thrive because no dream of mine will be confined, or shut down, because I will know that in a world like ours everything can be possible. All I have to do is believe in myself and set my mind free to contribute to a world where there are no boundaries for who I can become.

The Power of Education
By Charlotte Arzouian

To me, education can be the key to success. School is like a blank page with no thoughts or ideas. What makes school special is the students. The community. Different markers or people go into school, be themselves and show their culture. The paper gets filled with different perspectives and people’s true colors. This is what makes P.S.32 what it is.

Steve Jobs
By Michael Capers

I drew a computer technician because since I was a kid, I have been interested in computers and technology. To see myself in what I am learning, I would have to see myself in the future. I want to work in technology as a software engineer and be as successful as Steve Jobs!

Untitled
By Geanthony Cooper Prescott

My drawing shows a character creating a drawing. I made it to show the struggle of creating early art and how many ideas float through your head, but you can’t get it right on paper. To see myself in what I’m learning, I need to see how slowly I improve. This process in self-improvement is vital to seeing myself in what I learn.
Fashion Design
By Javonte Bostice

My drawing is of a fashion designer and a model. To truly see myself in what I am learning, I imagine myself working in the field of fashion. Fashion Design is my favorite subject in school because I have always had a passion for creating coordinated outfits that show my sense of style and mood.

The Artist The Storyteller and The Weirdo
By Odessa Smith

When I open a book, or when I'm writing one, I usually see myself as a character. In my art, I wanted to show how inside a book there can be anything and everything, including me. Inside the book, The Artist, the Storyteller and the Weirdo by Odessa Smith, I showed wonderful things and animals, and I also showed me stepping out of the book.

Seeing Myself and Learning
By Jordan Thoby

If I were to truly see myself in what I learn each day in school, I would see reflections of my interests, including art, animals, and the human body. Most of all, I love learning about people who look like me, and how they were able to do the things that I want to do throughout history. This picture is the classroom that best reflects me, even during a pandemic, and it reminds me of who I want to be.

Relatable Literature
By Tiara Coton

My drawing is of portrait of myself focused on reading a mystery novel. I am surrounded by other genres of books such as romance, realistic fiction and plays. I chose this because in school I like ELA the most. I put symbols around her such as the drama masks, heart and a magnify glass so the viewer would know what type of books I like. I like those genres because I can relate to them. I made the woman without a background because I like to learn and read peacefully without distractions.

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.
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