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Exploring Liberatory Practices of Dreamkeepers

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The Black Educology Mixtape is an open-access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. We feature a collective of Black people working to amplify and empower Black educational voices. Our scope and sequence focus on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.

Exploring Liberatory Practices of Dreamkeepers

Yaribel Mercedes, Ashira Mothersil, Bettina Love

ABSTRACT
In this paper, we interviewed four extremely accomplished Black educators who represent a range of disciplines, ages, and levels of education. We relied on referrals from peers in the field, then determined whether those individuals were exemplary Black educators using the extraordinary historian, psychologist, and teacher Dr. Asa Hillard's definition of a master teacher. The four educators we ultimately selected met those criteria. Our lengthy conversations with each educator explored their drive, inspiration, joy, and practices in the journey toward becoming and being a Black liberatory educator.

Introduction

Renowned scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings' 1994 groundbreaking book *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, profiled teachers to showcase exemplars of good teaching. These educators highlighted the significance of curricular, instructional, and pedagogical models of education that advocate for teaching as a liberatory praxis in which learning is communal and relational, knowledge is critical and continuously recreated and shared (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This book transformed the field of education, setting the stage for meaningfully exploring the possibilities of what a rigorous, intellectual, and thoughtful culturally relevant pedagogy could be.

When critical race theory was introduced in the field of education, both narrative and counter-narrative centralized the concept of *experiential knowledge* providing a lens for educational researchers to explore how race and racism functioned in the everyday lives of teachers, students, and parents (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner, 2012; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Though much has been written and theorized about Black teachers' experiences, curriculum development, and instructional practices (Foster, 1990, 1997; Irvine & Irvine, 1983; King, 1993; Milner 2012; Siddle-Walker, 200 the interior lives of Black teachers are too often absent from research. We know how Black educators resist racism, teach in hostile environments, and "make a way out of no way" in underfunded schools to produce Black excellence, and yet we know far less about their interior lives, which is what makes Black liberatory education even possible.

In *The Site of Memory* by Toni Morrison (1995), she discussed how book-length narratives of the lives of Black people, especially those who were enslaved, seldom address their interior lives. Although Morrison was discussing the use of discovering interior lives in fiction, her observation is salient to how we understand Black teachers, beyond test scores, stories of achievement, and resisting racism. The practices of Black liberatory education are born out of Black people's interior lives of joy, healing, mentorship, and inspiration, among countless other factors. Almost thirty years since *Dreamkeepers*, we investigate the interior lives of exemplary Black educators who center their teaching on Black liberatory practices.

We interviewed four extremely accomplished Black educators who range in disciplines, age, and level of education. We relied on referrals from peers in the field, then determined whether those individuals were exemplary Black educators using the extraordinary historian, psychologist, and teacher Dr. Asa Hillard's definition of a master teacher:

> Teachers must be people of character and commitment. They must take the initiative and be creative. They should be curious. They should learn habitually. Of course, they must have skill in communication. Some of these qualities may not be acquired simply through training. From my observation, teachers who are successful have a more holistic approach to teaching. Their methods are good, but they understand that what matters most is the relationship between the teacher and the student. That, above all, is what I want children to have—a teacher who is first a human being. These kinds of teachers have been very important in the lives of my own children. When my daughter now writes to teachers she had when she was younger, she writes to the people who really cared about her and to those she cared about.

He also insisted that a master teacher understands that there is no achievement gap between Black students and white students; rather, there is an excellence gap between Black students and their potential (Edelman, 2007). The four educators we ultimately selected met those criteria. Our lengthy conversations with each educator explored their drive, inspiration, joy, and practices in the journey toward becoming and being a Black liberatory educator.

Dr. Debra Smith

Age: 57
Years in the Classroom : 22 years as an educator (math teacher, counselor, and counselor educator)
Degrees: PhD Counselor Education and Practice, MS Counseling and Psychology, BS Psychology, AA Education
Awards: 2023 Marcia Prewitt Spiller Teaching Excellence Award

What educators inspire you?

It goes back to history with the Marva Collins story, Mary McLeod Bethune and then from contemporaries whom I do know and have sat at their feet, from Maya Angelou or to Oprah. Then I had my baba Asa Hillard whom I met in my later postgraduate years as a PhD student. When you talk about knowing who you are, having that strong Black identity, I walk in the room and he's like, "Queen Debra, what do you have?" He just treated me so special, so divine. I didn't get it anywhere else. I was at the counseling psychology department; he was in education policy study. I would run downstairs and just look at his office, and how he lights up when I walk into the room, I was like, "That's all I need. No words, I just need to see your face because I was at a place and the scientific stuff was getting to me." And he said, "No, you can't quit, you gotta do it."

Then I've had some teachers model what effective teaching is. Beverly Tatum who wrote, *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria*, I got a chance to sit with her in the cafeteria and talk to her. Also president Jimmy Carter, a master teacher, knowing everybody in the room and making a connection, being intentional. I've been to his Sunday school classes. Just to sit at their feet, to be observed, to see and then take, not even take from them but saying, "Oh, I see that in me." It just gave me permission to actually exercise the gift that is already in me. To see others be so truthful to themselves, it allowed me the permission to do the same.

How did these educators impact your teaching?

I would say, when you're good and you're great, you don't need to ever say that; your work will speak for you. That's what I learned from Oprah, is to be so flat out phenomenal and excellent as your standard. So when you walk in a room, they know what you're gonna bring. They loved, they cared, they saw me and that's what I do for each of my students.

Like Beverly Tatum, they were sweet and they were humble and they were darn good. They knew their stuff. I know mathematics like none other. To bring it home, to break it down and to make it organic, to make it evolve, to help inspire the children, that's what I got. When I see Jimmy Carter meander through the whole Sunday school classroom, he was so well read, so well traveled, so well versed, he made a connection with everyone. And so, to be authentic, to be genuine and to know your craft. I still read, I'm still learning especially after this post pandemic and all the ills kids are perhaps going through other than mathematics. To create that caring community so they know they're safe, they're loved, I see them. Everything they need is already within them. Everything.

How do you define Black liberatory practices?

It comes from a place of genuine love and caring. Baba Asa has taught me to treat children like humans, love them. When you talk about love, it's patient, it's kind, there's long suffering, there's genuineness, there's no keeping score of wrongs. Just forgiving, it never gloats. Then being Black and helping Black excellence as a liberatory teacher, I gotta have some type of strong Black identity.

As I face other children of color, of Blackness, especially in the environment where I teach, a white elite environment, we have a shared experience. Sometimes they don't want to go into the cafeteria, they wanna sit by their people. I too, as a teacher, wanna sit for lunch with someone I can be relaxed and at home with. My hair can go from curly to straight and I don't feel like answering questions. Just having that soul. Socially, how does that play out for my seventh and eighth graders? How do they navigate that? Do they feel at home with me? We can talk about that.

Also I honor their parents. I go to a lot of events. I go to dance recitals and basketball games, swim meets, all the extracurricular play activities because then I meet their generation. I meet grandma, I meet auntie, and I meet uncle. They have a caring community. So it's not only Dr. Smith, the math teacher. I'm gonna be at their swim meet, I talk to their people and then make those connections. I am because they are, and therefore we are.

Can you give us examples of Black liberatory practices?

When you walk into my classroom, an example that you would see of Black liberatory practice is you see my students, you see photos of them. When my kids walk into the room they're gonna see themselves. I'm intentional about that. It is a warm caring environment; expectations are high for everyone. I ask my students, my Black students, "have you given me your very best,"there's intentional pushing.

Also there is an open invitation when things are happening at the school. Whether someone said something or they feel that there was a racist comment, they have a safe place or a person that they can come and talk to.

I'm intentional about the mathematicians we speak of in the curriculum. We have the *Hidden Figures* and some more, to bring those examples, even the film into the room.

How does your curriculum advance a Black liberatory praxis (practice) and pedagogical approach?

Making sure that my kids are represented in the new digital age of the textbook. We're about to celebrate Pi Day on 3.14 [March, 14th], so from Steph Curry to Albert Einstein's birthday, my kids have something that they can identify with. Being intentional about the example, using my kids' lived experiences.

I enjoy the football season because when we're talking about negative integers, they're running plays, they're losing yardage. Adapting that to what they are already doing. When I taught probability, one kid finally got it. He said, "Oh my goodness, that's why I always called tales when the coin toss at the beginning of the game, I didn't know that was probability." So empowering my kids to know this is how it relates to math, I got a chance to learn a lot more about these football players than I would have known otherwise.

Then I'm intentional about talking to the publishers and making sure that we have a curriculum that's sound.

How do you assess and measure success for Black children from a Black liberatory perspective?

What I love to see is confidence and self-efficacy. Them knowing it and being able to say it with confidence. To be able to walk in that room and own it, I am ready. I know that preparation has taken place, the expectations were there. I have a relationship with the students, they don't want to disappoint me, even as they move on. So as far as assessing, walking in and having confidence that my students have prepared, they are empowered, are sure of themselves and they're ready to go!

There are some tangible ways I can see that play out on a written assessment. Giving them a question to disaggregate or to break down, or a problem. To be able to do that with a sense of certainty. And if not, that's the time the nurturing and teaching would come about. I give my kids a chance to know mistakes; math mistakes allow thinking to happen. To be able to speak it, to be able to walk in that room to own it and see the confidence that exudes from them being an empowered learner.

What policies and practices have advanced liberatory practices in schools and classrooms?

One is the DEI work, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Making sure teachers who participate systemically become more knowledgeable about people of color, so they won't have to ask silly questions, mostly about hair. Our kids are getting annoyed about that, the majority of teachers not knowing whether they have long hair or short hair. The work helps broaden the scope of what we need.

What brings you joy in the classroom?

Oh man, what really brings me joy is planning a dynamic lesson with my kids in mind. Knowing that they're gonna be excited about it and then making it come alive, the joy is when we do the lesson. The simple thing of teaching them probability with Skittles, now Asa Hillard would call that genius! Just to see them light up, but also walk away with skills and then competency. I like my kids to enjoy math. I like them to have fun. I like them to be immersed. That's what brings me the most joy. Even the preparation! I'm over the moon with getting ready for Pi Day 3.14. I got this whole banner, got the cafeteria collaborating with us, they're gonna serve pizza pies and we're gonna do some pie contests. They're excited! To make it adventurous for my students to learn, yeah, I find joy in that.

Chelsey Culley-Love
Age: 44
Years in the Classroom: 21
Degrees: Master's Degree
Awards: TOTY, Advanced Teacher, 2022 K-12 Urban Teacher of the Year

What educators inspire you?

My fourth grade teacher, a Black man. His name was Mr. Flippen. He had this energy, a pep about him. We had a class song, Man in the Mirror, that we performed at the end of the year. I got to be Michael Jackson, and sing. When I got my own class, I said, I'm gonna have a class song from Mr. Flippen's inspiration.

Before Mr. Flippen, it was Carol Backas. She was my kindergarten teacher. I grew up in Danville, Virginia. Very southern, very prim, very proper. Which is the other half of me. That was Ms. Backus. She was the one who instilled in me, to always look good. Make sure your tights are neat, your hair is nice. Stay ready. I loved looking at her, I loved seeing her. I love dressing up for my students because they deserve my best. They deserve the time, effort, and attention. I want them to feel recognized and valued.

After that, Ms. Evans, my math teacher in high school. She came to high school with me because I struggled with math so much. She moved to teach at the high school. I doubt she did it just for me, but I was in her class for three years and she made sure I passed math. Anastasia Evans, she was always very sharp dressed too.

How did these educators impact your teaching?

I told you about Mr. Flippen. He impacted me in the space of knowing that education is deeper than academics. He gave us a chance to experience music, to talk to each other, and an opportunity to learn from each other.

Ms. Backus, she heavily impacted my self-esteem. I was able to understand how to look the part so that I would be invited in the room. I teach my own students not with the emptiness of just showing up, but how to take up space. Those lessons from those teachers helped me navigate and understand that I could impart that in my own students.

How do you define Black liberatory practices?

I teach my students to take your things. Walk in with a feeling and an assurance of confidence that you belong there. Whatever is there that you want, you deserve to take it. It's not the empty entitlement that you should be given

something. It's that you have worked, you are you, and the things that you are owed, you will take them. You will make them better and you will move forward with them.

I believe that Black excellence and liberatory education looks like learning stuff that you care about. Having the freedom to let your brilliance rest. Part of the reason I think that I am always striving for excellence and the ways that I expect excellence from other people is that I had to be perfect. There weren't that many of us. People are looking at me so I can't mess up. I can't misstep. I have to do everything right. That was a lot of pressure that I put on myself. I think excellence is important, but the excellence was also exhausting.

With my students today, through counseling, through therapy, I've learned that you have to give young people a chance to rest their brilliance and feel comfortable, confident and safe with you. That they don't have to be perfect. That creates burnout for students, just like it creates burnout for teachers. Now when it's time to turn up, you better turn up.

Can you give us examples of Black liberatory practices?

When I first started teaching, I taught students with emotional and behavior disorders. A lot of them had so much going on in their little lives and they would come to class exhausted.

Even though I taught third and fourth grade, I instituted a nap time in my class. After we'd come in from recess, we would turn the lights off and have reflection time. You can reflect by coloring, by going to sleep, whatever you need to help your body to recharge and reset. The kids were so much better after lunch. I decided I was gonna do this for the rest of my teaching.

Another example, I did this really cool project last year after and during virtual learning. We did a project for Reconstruction. We focused on Black Wall Streets across the United States. They learned about the importance of amassing Black wealth. We created our own Ujima Wall Street, Ujima Bees was the name of my classroom. They thought about things that were interesting to them. Some said, “Well, I'd love to learn how to make soap.” I was like cool, let's learn how to make soap. Others, “I wanna make body scrubs and lip glosses.” Cool! You need to figure out how to do it. Do the research, figure out how to make it. I had students learn how to make soap. We wrote up business plans. They figured out stuff they did already, and stuff they wanted to learn. We made a market and they sold their things for real money. That taught them the importance of their time, the value of their time, the value of the gifts. But not only that, they also learned the importance of giving back. We made a donation to a charity. Having a presence outside of class was important to them.

How does your curriculum advance a Black liberatory praxis (practice) and pedagogical approach?

Dr. Muhammad's framework changed everything I did. It gave me the tools I needed to understand how to interpret the curriculum I was given. This is where the learning is gonna happen and take place. Everything I taught was around Blackness. Everything, for everybody. As we talked about George Floyd, bringing to light what we've known already, a lot of my white students needed to have someone explain to them why it was important for their class to be centered in Blackness. When they understood it, they were like, that's what we're doing and that's who we are. They were so proud. They carried forth what Ujima means, which is collective work and responsibility. I chose that four years ago, what our class was gonna be called, but it came to light and meaning with such passion. They carry forth what Ujima meant with a sense and a badge of honor. They took that to heart. Everything we did had the lens of brilliance, of joy, of genius.

How do you assess and measure success for Black children from a Black liberatory perspective?

I can measure their success by the way they were able to look at the next assignment, text discussion with a lens of criticality that showed that they were understanding how these building blocks were being built. I had a student who did a whole comic on Rainbow Girl. Her superhero was fighting homophobia. She felt empowered enough, safe enough in this space with me, with us, to speak that truth. She doesn't identify as queer at all. This is something she recognizes from the work that we had done, the ways that they were able to question and hold each other

accountable for stuff they were saying or things they were doing. So I would say that the assessment was an observation of their growth as human beings.

What policies and practices have advanced liberatory practices in schools and classrooms?
In my last school there was a change in administration. The new Executive Director really believed in Dr. Muhammed's work and wanted to bring that into the space and pretty much said, listen, "Just do it." Go on whatever field trip you want. She actually asked teachers, "What is your freedom dream? What would you wanna do?" So I did the Ujima Wall Street project.

I think given that space, if you had the imagination, if you had the dream and you wanted to try something, if you asked for it, then you could do it. That is a sense of freedom and liberation that not many teachers and spaces have. They gave us the money to do it, they saw how beneficial it was. You know some teachers ask for staplers and pencils?! Somebody is telling you what is your freedom dream? Pencils. What? A lot of teachers don't have audacity. They don't have it for themselves. So if you don't have it for yourself, how can you have it for your kids?

What brings you joy in the classroom?

Okay. No judgment. I am hella competitive and so winning brings me joy! I mean winning like, "Oh, you think we can't? Watch this! Oh that can't be done? Watch this! Oh, it's too hard? Watch this." That brings me joy. Watching kids read each other with intellect and evidence brings me so much joy. When they get it and they're able to pop off, I think that's so important. When you get out of school to be able to stand in any space. Not just showing up with this emptiness, but showing up with the content and taking your things.

Conversations around achievement that parents are able to have around love and growth brings me a lot of joy. When we can change the narrative of what a parent teacher conference looks like and they can see the growth in their young people as humans, and the humanity that they are gaining brings me joy in the classroom.

Dr Darryl Jordan
Age: 41
Years in Classroom: 22
Degrees: BS Music Ed (NYU), MM Music Ed (BU), MEd Music and Music Ed (TC), EdD Music and Music Education (TC)
Awards: 2020 Music Educators Association of NYC Music Educator Honoree

What educators inspire you?

My mother being a teacher and seeing her in action. Patricia Pates Eaton, who was very much involved in my growth as a music educator. Kenyatta Hardison, who was the reason I jumped into music teaching. She really poured into me. Roger Holliman, who was a musician at my church growing up. Dr. Nathan Carter, who has long been the director of the Morgan State University choirs. I watched him as a kid. I wanted to be him in a lot of ways. I wanted to do what he did. Darin Atwater, who is a tremendous musician, composer with the Soulful Symphony, having worked with him, I learned a lot. I have to speak the name of Richard Smallwood, whose music has affected me, but also his commitment to scholarship and development of other musicians has always been inspiring, and has always pushed me. Those are just a few of the people that have been really inspiring to me as a teacher outside of Mom and what she's done.

How did these educators impact your teaching?

They were able to meet us where we were and speak the language of whatever stage we were in. I think about Kenyatta being intentional, finding our music, our way of listening to music, and our way of enjoying music. Bringing in dance, hip hop and using that to help us to understand key musical concepts and skills.

I also appreciated their ability to laugh with us. I know that's not a thing that we think about all the time, but it's stressful enough to just be Black and Brown in the world. We need to have individuals who look like us, laugh with us, and also know how to do the work. To be highly skillful, but also know how to just be like, "Yo, that was funny. Or like, man, this is kind of hard." You know what I mean? To commiserate with us and then say, "Alright cool, I'm gonna take you here now." I think that's helpful. Building those relationships has always been key for them.

Ramon Reburg, who had been the longtime director of the gospel choir at LaGuardia High School, he was a serious technician, but he was the same person who also would pick you up when you were at the bottom. He would be the person who would get you something to eat, drive you to school if you didn't have a way and be at your recitals.

Gregory Shepherd, who was my voice teacher for many years, knew how to demystify work done in white spaces to build a bridge between that and our cultural experience. Being a classically trained singer, it's hard to go about singing and not feel othered. To feel like someone is actually helping you to bridge the gap, someone's actually saying to you, "How is this any different than when you sing something in church or sing something in the Black experience?" To then show you how the songs relate or how the voice relates in both of those styles, I always appreciated that. That's something that I've lived out in my own teaching practice.

How do you define Black liberatory practices?

Black liberatory practice is an actual shepherding of students towards liberation. It's a commitment to what I'm doing as I'm learning the skills, to help me have a level of independence with those skills. These same educators that I'm speaking names on, they commit to still support me in what I'm doing through social media or through calls or through whatever it may be. They stayed with me and became my cheer squad. They're not my teachers directly anymore, but they're present and they're still pouring in. I've seldom experienced that outside of these Black liberators that I'm speaking of. They live it on purpose, it's pretty amazing. You can't liberate unless you plan to stay for a while.

Can you give us examples of Black liberatory practices?

In terms of voice, I'm just really interested in looking at the whole person and not just the voice. What is psychologically going on with them is heard in the voice. I'm very intentional about trying to unearth that part so that they can recognize that singing is not just your singing voice, it's your speaking voice. It's your angry voice. It's your crying voice. It's your whining voice. It's your complaining voice. It's your everything. It carries everything that is going on with you. I'm always interested in the social emotional learning of children. I'm really interested in trying to help them uncover how that relates to their voice and how it relates to freeing their voice. I also recognize how society and racism have silenced the voice and boxed it in. I try to find ways to remove those constraints piece by piece. Some of that is through reflective work that they do and that I do with them.

Also when I'm working with students I build relationships that last on. I am intentional about making sure to invite them into support and teaching that go beyond the classroom. I find ways to build partnerships for them and connect them to programs. In my professional life, most everybody who works with me are former students. I involve them in activities that give them opportunities and when they move on, I'm the one celebrating them and encouraging them.

How does your curriculum advance a Black liberatory praxis (practice) and pedagogical approach?

When I teach music history, I am interested in highlighting the voices that are silenced. That's really important to me. I'm also intentional with turning traditional practices or norms about how you teach on its head. For instance, I start from the backdrop of, "You are American kids growing up in American music, which is by and large derived from Black and Brown spaces, so the lens through which you're going to understand music has to start there." I'm always interested in helping them understand their connection to people and cultural history. It's a big thing for me

to show how they are situated within this legacy. Not just Black and Brown students, but students from other cultures, to help them understand how they are situated within a Black cultural legacy.

How do you assess and measure success for Black children from a Black liberatory perspective?

Success is Black and Brown children transcending and working at the level above the structures that would tend to hold them back or hold them down. It's this sense of being able to live and be whole and healed and be capable of making choices that will support not only them, but their family and their community, without feeling threatened. A space that is open and allows us to be able to do what we need to do. To build Black cultural thriving within and among any society we walk into. I think success is having your access that allows you to affect change within those communities, so you can be actively participating and supporting the expansion of who we are and who we can be.

What policies and practices have advanced liberatory practices in schools and classrooms?

For the first four years of teaching, I was in a predominantly Black space. What I saw in those spaces were Black and Brown educators, who did the work, who lived it out, who did amazing things with their students and really focused on liberation. They focused on not belittling kids and not holding them back by disciplining them. They found ways to love them to better. They found ways to give them something to shoot for and to be inspired by. They looked at them as a whole child.

These teachers that I saw, these leaders that I saw in a lot of different ways took the kids home with them figuratively in their heart. You take them home because you recognize that they are a part of you. They are who you are trying to cultivate. We see it like cultivation of land. It's a care thing. I live on the land, I cultivate the land, I plant seeds, I water seeds, I till the land. It's not just, I did my job, I showed up, I'm here. No, you have to pour into them. It's all encompassing.

What brings you joy in the classroom?

Listen, I always love it when they get it, that's always exciting. I love when they start to intrinsically motivate towards it. They just take it and run with it. That's just always exciting for me to watch and see. Also what brings me joy is watching the kids that come back who at the time didn't get it, but then they come back and they're like, "Yo, this changed me."

Tunisia Bristol
Age: 34
Years in Classroom: 12
Degrees: Bank Street Graduate School of Education New York, NY (May 2021), Master of Arts Educational Leadership, LEAP Apprentice Columbia University-Teachers College, New York, N.Y. (October 2011), Master of Arts Education; Intellectual Disability/Autism Award: TEACH Grant Cornell University- Ithaca, N.Y. (May 2010), Bachelor of Science; Human Development concentrations in: Life Course, Social Contexts and Social Policy, Social and Personality Development
Awards Received: 2021-2022 Cahn Fellowship Ally, Teacher Leadership Facilitating Inquiry in the Lab Classroom micro-credential March 2019, NYC Big Apple Award Finalist 2018

What educators inspire you?

My grandfather. He was such a storyteller. He really helped me understand the importance of saying your truth and speaking your story. He's definitely impacted me because I do a lot of storytelling with my kids, opening up to them, and building trust. I would also say my sixth grade science teacher Ms. Lewis. I remember being given the space of problem-solving in sixth grade. Her being a Black female was so powerful. Also, my mom. She was an immigrant, single mother and things weren't easy for her. She had this level of grit and love, everything can be figured out. Then I think about my older brother. He's still my go-to person for little stuff, financial stuff or bigger stuff. I think of my current principal, we've known each other for 12 years. I remember starting off as a first year teacher and he was the

instructional coach at the time. I would come to him like, “My kids really aren't understanding macromolecules and saturated risk, unsaturated fat. I wanna bring in my George Foreman grill and cook some bacon so that they could see.” And he was like, “What's stopping you from doing that?” So I brought my George Foreman grill and we cooked some turkey bacon and pork bacon. That was important to my lesson, and to my learning as an educator.

Sometimes we put these barriers on us and it stops learning, it stops creativity. When you remove those barriers such beautiful things can happen. I've been super fortunate to have so many educators who have been so impactful to my craft.

How did these educators impact your teaching?

They helped me build creativity. They helped me remove mental barriers. They helped me lead from a place of relationship building. They've taught me the importance of storytelling and being able to tell my story but then also listen to the story of my kids. So those lessons of creativity, grit, storytelling, of seeing these little human beings as little human beings. How am I supporting my learners socially and emotionally? How am I engaging with them? How am I building trust and allowing them to trust me but then also feel safe and trusted in the class or in my classroom. Those are all lessons that I've learned and I'm still learning through them. I'm still fine tuning.

How do you define Black liberatory practices?

I feel like there has to be a sense of self-discovery within this space. If I am not in tune with my identity, who I am, how I identify, how it impacts, how I navigate and see the world, I can't do that work. I can’t engage kids in self-discovery if I haven't figured out who I am. A huge part is having those difficult conversations with self. Who am I? Where am I in this space? Where do I wanna be? What growth do I wanna have? Then mirroring and scaffolding that for kids. Do the students that you're working with see themselves mirrored in whatever instruction you're giving? Do they see how this science content, this math content, this book, this historical time period, do they see how it's relevant to them? If they don't see themselves embedded in it, do they understand where those connections are? Are the systems built within there for them to make those connections? It first starts with a lot of self-work, unpacking, and repacking. A lot of those conversations adults rarely have, especially if they're not actively engaging in spaces to have it. How do we build spaces where adults can do that work in safe spaces but also build systems where that work can be done for children?

Can you give us examples of Black liberatory practices?

Science is definitely a white male-dominated field. It's always been a challenge for me reflecting how I avoid continuing to perpetuate what my experience with science was. I've been constantly trying to critique that. So one thing I've started in the past few years is telling the story of Henrietta Lacks. She was so integral in all the innovations we have now, like in vitro fertilization, understanding HIV, any kind of viral infection, and understanding cancer.

I've had students analyze her story and how her cells were literally taken without consent. We analyzed that injustice, and we looked at what's moral versus illegal, and how her family is still fighting to this day. We also talk about Rosalyn Franklin and her contribution to the structure of DNA and how she's gotten no credit as a female researcher.

How do we tell these stories, how do we critique and still learn content? Part of what I've been doing is trying to embed those silent voices into science. Students are learning about who these people are and the impact they've had.

How does your curriculum advance a Black liberatory praxis (practice) and pedagogical approach?

We're allowing them to have narratives. It's not just this one narrative, what's the counter-narrative? Who is it being told from? Whose point of view is missed? All those things need to be embedded when I think of how I do this work.

At the end of the day, if we're not giving students content-rich experiences, we're not supporting them in the content. We can do all of this work, but if they're not learning the foundation of science, we are doing a disservice. For me it is making sure that we are challenging them with content, we're challenging them to think critically about science content but then we're also giving them stories.

How do you assess and measure success for Black children from a Black liberatory perspective?

That's so heavy. It's so heavy because it's definitely going back to what I said with the content. If we're not preparing them to engage in challenging critical analytical thinking, we are doing a huge disservice, point blank period. When we're thinking about assessing, we have these formative assessments, and there's state tests at the end of the year. Can our students critique and get information? Are we preparing them to be critical thinkers? And then how are we assessing that they've met those needs? How can we standardize and assess all kids who have different learning experiences and then think about the inequities within systems.

Seeing how students can critique content, learn content, apply content, and logistical standards that we want kids to meet. If we're not giving them these experiences and they cannot perform, then we also have to critique what we are doing? How are we also perpetuating the same system that doesn't work for our kids? Can students show mastery of skills? Can they apply content? Are they aware of their connections to content? Just all the layers within that is definitely how I see assessments.

What policies and practices have advanced liberatory practices in schools and classrooms?

From a leadership standpoint, being very purposeful in who they bring into the community. One thing about our administration is that they have teachers on hiring meetings because the people you bring into this space need to truly believe that the kids in front of them can learn and can be challenged. We can have all these novels representing people of color, but if adults don't have belief in the kids in front of them and what they can do, then what in the world are we actually doing? They have to be open to learning.

Are we building the idea that the Black and Brown kids in front of you have the potential to be amazing? Do they have that mindset? Are we giving teachers experiences to learn and to be challenged? What are they teaching so that the students they're servicing can also be challenged? A lot of times once we hire educators, we're like, "Our job's done." What support are we providing for educators? Also a practice that needs to be embedded if we're talking about doing Black liberatory work. Being a part of these communities I reflect on my role, my identity as a Black woman in education, and in STEM. That's gonna impact the students that I serve, making sure that this is an ongoing process.

What brings you joy in the classroom?

When I see those light bulb moments for kids, especially when I have students who in the beginning of the year tell me how much they hate science. My heart, my soul, gets crushed. So for me it's seeing that transition. Also, planning brings me joy. Because it forces and challenges me to be super creative and think about what experiences I want my students to have. When I hear students go from how much they hated science, to science is my favorite subject. "It's like, yes, everyone should love science!" When I hear families talk about it, like, "Yes, we better learn about Henrietta Lacks!" And grandma sending me an email of how she can support at home because that's all you keep talking about.

And just other things like being in a school where I can give students access to things that I didn't have. When we have extra money, as a science department we get 3D printers and microscopes. Students are designing and then 3D printing it. That brings me joy.

Conclusion

In *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, bell hooks and Dr. Cornel West (1991) (re)mind us that dialogic conversations are true acts of love between two or more individuals that speak profoundly to their lived

experience. These exceptional Black educators and activists engaged in a rigorous dialogue about their Black liberatory pedagogical approaches. Again and again, they uplift the importance of building educational spaces that consider teaching as an act of radical love and a practice of freedom and liberation. These Black Dreamkeepers emphasized the significance of seeing their students' humanity, recognizing their genius, and cultivating spaces filled with joy and deep care. In Dr. Darryl Jordan's words, "Black liberatory practice is an actual shepherding of students toward liberation." Centering students' genius and perspectives is vital, simply because the purpose of education is to ensure students feel self-empowered, self-determined, and self-liberated (Muhammad & Williams, 2023).

Black liberatory practices demand a holistic approach to teaching and learning, where students are seen, heard, valued, and affirmed. A place where there is a deep commitment to fostering students' sociopolitical consciousness in examining systems of power and dominance and figuring out who and whose they are (Dillard, 2021). A (re)membering that enables the brilliance they possess to be nurtured, the beauty of their curiosity to be discovered and where their freedom dreams emerge. *Dreamkeepers* honor the dignity of their students' humanity by empowering their sense of self-worth and self-concept and never casting doubt on their personhood (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Each of these exemplary Black educators shared a profound dedication and responsibility to the communities they served and to nurturing spaces where students and their families felt safe, loved, joy and at *home.* If we wish to foster the conditions where learning can exist in its most profound and intimate form, we must teach in a way that respects and cares for the souls of our students (hooks, 1994).

Learning environments require an overhaul to the color-evasive, racially neutral and dysconscious curricular, instructional and pedagogical approaches to education. What, who, and how we teachers *matters*. No longer can we solely teach a standardized education that does not fully encapsulate the brilliance and magic of our communities. As Tunisia Bristol asserts, "I feel like there has to be a sense of self-discovery within this space. If I am not in tune with my identity, who I am, how I identify, how it impacts, how I navigate and see the world, I can't do that work. I can't engage kids in self-discovery if I haven't figured out who I am." Learning environments committed to setting high expectations, rigor, critical love and a doctrine of radical joy and genius are spaces and places where dreams can no longer be deferred but cultivated.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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