Insisting on Success as Resistance: Building an Ecosystem of Black Joy, Laughter and Affirmation

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Whitney Hanley, Ph.D & Breanya Hogue, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

School climate is a complex system involving norms, goals, values, relationships, practices and organizational structures. It includes the composition of the school and school practices. School composition encompasses the social and economic characteristics of a school, whereas school practice includes administrative leadership and the utilization of resources (Anyon et al., 2016; Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2006; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Thapa et al., 2013). If students do not feel their needs are being met by their school environment their emotional, psychological and academic needs are at risk (Cohen et al., 2009; Connell & Welborn, 1991; Libbey, 2004). Black students in particular are subject to unfair treatment in school because of school practices designed based on dominant white culture and thus misaligned with Black cultural knowledge and style. Following the pandemic, collectively, we have been individually, socially, emotionally, mentally, and physically impacted (Bartlett, Griffin, & Thomson, 2020; Patrick, et al., 2020). Black communities in particular, who were already greatly impacted, are experiencing even larger negative gaps (Parolin, 2021; Wright, et al., 2022). Narrowing these gaps is necessary, but how do we build an ecosystem of Black Joy, laughter and affirmation as resistance within the apparatus of education? Research particularly focused on the school experiences of Black adolescents, that highlight support from family and community combat the adversity that Black students experience in school. Students need more than an adult to say I care about you. That is not enough. Educators must communicate that they care through facilitating intentional opportunities to build joy, laughter and affirmation not with control, but through high, realistic expectations, respect and insisting that students can succeed. This call to action provides a scoping review of suggestions from the authors and current literature that educators, practitioners, and communities could consider applying in order to build stronger ecosystems of Black joy, laughter and affirmation.

Introduction

Public school is both historically and presently a space of exclusion and oppression for Black students. Teachers and administrators operate within the micro-politics of schools based on national, local, and school policies. Individual assumptions of student behavior often create a culture where differences equate to deviance (Danford & Smith, 2005). Thus, research on the school-to-prison pipeline shows Black students experience inequities related to discipline and referral to special education services compared to their same age, white peers (Losen, 2018; Samimi, et. al, 2023). Implicit biases related to perceptions of Black students being less innocent and more adult-like than their peers create experiences of isolation and surveillance. Since the pandemic, the marginalization of Black students has been exacerbated. Even so, Black educators and leaders make it their purpose to disrupt and resist this master narrative.

Historically, Black women educators have been the othermothers (caregivers for children that are not biologically their own) for Black students in the public school system. Many researchers have described their interactions and teaching styles as warm demander pedagogy that provides adult mentorship and motivation (Collins, 2000; Perry et al., 2003). The term warm demander first appeared in Kleinfeld’s (1975) study of effective teachers of Alaskan Indian children to describe the ways in which the teachers interacted with their students. Warm demanding appeals to the social justice agenda toward improving students in and out of school by approaching
students with positive regard, knowing their cultures well, and insisting they perform to a high standard (Bondy & Ross, 2008; King, 1994; Perry et al., 2003). Particularly, when described as a practice with Black students, warm demanders use a no-nonsense authoritative teaching style because of their mission to give them a future and the belief that they must learn (Carter-Andrews et al., 2019). Being a warm demander became a cultural practice rooted in African tradition, essential in the Jim Crow era, in which Black women educators go above and beyond their educational duties and attend to students’ psychological and emotional needs (Collins, 1986, 2000). This style of communication and teaching often served as a buffer for negative experiences. Othermothering creates a strong sense of self and academic success. Warm demander pedagogy supports the success of Black students in the K-12 educational ecosystem (Delpit, 1995; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ladson-Billings, 2000) in that it supports a concern for students’ overall well-being.

The Pandemic & Impacts on Black Youth Learning

If you take the time out to do a search and review the scholarly literature about the impact of the pandemic on Black youth, you will find that it is currently a hot topic within education. So many mandates and urges for policy changes are occurring to address the deficits that exist amongst these marginalized communities. With these pushes, we as Black educologists have a priority to be a voice at the table regarding these issues, but much more importantly, we have a priority to advocate for the humanity and overall Black Joy of our most vulnerable population: our students, whose voices unfortunately most often go overlooked and unheard. Years of research notes that our U.S. educational systems as a whole fail to nurture the humanity and joy of our Black students by way of disciplinary practices, special education placements, considerations for gifted programs, and academically overall (Ford et al., 2023; Graves & Ye, 2017; Sullivan & Field, 2013). NAEP 2022 data revealed that 17% of Black fourth graders were “proficient” or “advanced” in reading (NAEP, 2022). This means that 83% of Black students are failing in reading. With the continuation of the ongoing “reading war” related to the best approaches to teaching literacy, policymakers have supported and pushed a body of evidence-based research known as the science of reading (SoR), which indicates there are five essential components of learning how to read: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Though SoR supports best practices for literacy instruction and assessment, when supporting Black youth, we must also make sure we are considering inclusive pedagogy that affirm funds of knowledge (Moll, et al, 2006), which should encompass language practices (Johnson et al, 2023), cultural awareness, and social-emotional learning and well-being.

In this call to action, we offer insights from our backgrounds as Black educologists in facilitating opportunities for Black Joy within various contexts and recommendations for each of our respective fields of special and literacy education as a possible resource for practitioners, scholars, and communities collectively.

Positionality as Othermothers

Dedicated to the Community that Raised Me

“Did you do your homework?” That was my cue early on that education and doing well in school was important. I grew up in a small town in western Kentucky, where everybody knows everybody. When I think about my experiences and Black Joy, I immediately make connections to the seamless structure of family, community, and school. No matter where I was or what I did as a child, there was always an adult close by to let me know: I see you and I’m going to make sure you’re doing right. While my single mother raised me, she also had a village of support from my grandmother, aunts, and uncles, who would reach in when necessary. That level of support brought pride and promise to my belief in a successful future. They taught me the importance of education early and while my mother worked hard, full time to help support me and my brother she also tapped into resources in the community to support my growth.

At the age of six, I became a member of Girls Incorporated. It was this nonprofit organization that gave my voice a platform and provided me with experiences, both vocational and educational, that challenged both gender and race stereotypes. My Girls Inc. experience was a community actualization of my potential and purpose. I learned that I had the right to be myself, to be proud and confident and develop the boldness to take risks. Each year I attended, I became more aware of who I was and more motivated to reach for success by creating goals and coming up with a plan to achieve them. By high school, I was a program facilitator, encouraging and empowering girls just as I had been encouraged and empowered. Nonetheless, perseverance, taking pride in your work, education, and dedication to the community were at the center of my experiences.
In school, I was a quiet and often reserved student who would otherwise go unnoticed, except by the few mothers in the school who took extra care to make me feel seen. I noticed that as I got older that the number of teachers who I formed relationships with became fewer; not only that, but by the time I got to high school, I found I could truly count on the teachers who looked like me to be invested in my success. I remember struggling with a language course and sitting in a parent teacher conference with my mom, upset and looking for additional support in the class, only to have my teacher reassure my mom by saying, “Well, she’s passing with a D, so she’s doing ok.” School wasn’t particularly hard for me academically. What was hard was these constant subtle messages I would receive about what I was capable of or should aspire for. Nonetheless in that same high school, Mrs. Hunter and Mr. Tandy, both Black educators connected to the community outside of school and leaders of our school organization. Students Teaching and Reaching Students, disrupted that narrative by providing us a space to explore options after high school. We learned about local and national colleges and universities, how to complete applications, financial aid options, and we had a safe space to just be and celebrate our unapologetic Black selves. When my assigned counselor was not available to answer questions and support me in figuring out the transition to college,[3] Mrs. Hunter made herself available and it was clear-made it her mission-to assure I thrived. It was the mothering from teachers and counselors who encouraged me, pushed me and, again, affirmed me of my capabilities. Their impact—caring, yet firm—led me to the path of education.

I began my teaching career as a special educator in the elementary setting and progressed to teaching students identified with (dis)abilities in middle school. I found myself becoming that very safe space and person that I needed and had as a student. Sometimes, students I didn’t teach would come by my class, and I would just listen, affirm them in their feelings, often relative to belonging, motivation, and feeling engaged. If they missed a day, I would check in on them; if they needed extra support with classwork or homework or otherwise had a conflict that they needed to talk through, I was there to listen. If there were resources school- or community-wide that I could connect them with, I did. It was a love that corrected with care. An understanding that they would have room to be curious, but also had to work hard to reach their goals. I was a resource, answering questions students seemed to only feel safe asking me, but also pressing them with the difficult questions, encouraging them to be reflective and self-aware. Being a teacher was a natural way to sow into my community the same ways my family, school mothers and community sowed into me. I looked out for and gave extra attention to those students who felt excluded and misaligned with their “schooling” experience, which were most often Black and Brown students. I looked out for them in the same way a family member would. I became their confidant. Their other mother in the building.

Making them feel like they were seen and belonged was only half of what they needed. I had to make sure they knew that they could always rise to the occasion and already possessed what they needed to be successful. I did that by checking them when they needed to be checked and developing a familial bond in which they knew when they came to me for guidance or just for someone to listen, I was going to meet them where they were without judgment or disdain. I am who I am for Black students because I know what I needed from my teachers and educators when I was a student. Ultimately, while mothering my students and providing emotional support, I paired sentiments of care and belonging with conditions that would cultivate success.

Sankofa—How My Past Shaped My Future as a Teacher Mother

When I reflect on the teacher that I am today and the ways that I prioritize and encourage Black Joy, I undoubtedly have to credit those key experiences from my personal journey that informed my pedagogy and practice. Though born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, I also like to credit my mom’s roots in Jackson, Tennessee when I think about my upbringing. The Southern hospitality and warmth that shaped my mom was what she passed on to us growing up. Speaking when you pass others on the street, “Yes/no ma’am/sir,” and just genuinely treating elders and others with kindness and respect were pillars of our upbringing. I normalized these habits, and when I briefly lived in Boston later in my life, I realized these were regional attributes.

I remember spending lots of quality time with my grandmother and her pushing my mother to raise us in church. After she passed, my mom kept the promise, and I remember being actively involved in youth ministries, including Jr. Missionary, Jr. Usher board, and youth choir. Because of my involvement, I remember having so many adult role models and mentors to look up to and that pored into me. These were my first teachers and an instrumental part of my village.

In school, my mother enrolled us in the traditional public-school program, and through it had advantages and more resources, I never had a Black teacher that looked like me and I was a part of the minority of the Black student population. There are few teachers who stand out in my K–12 experiences. One is my 5th grade teacher,
who coordinated a day trip to Washington, D.C., for us to view the places we learned about in social studies. That was the year I declared that I wanted to become a teacher. In high school, my Spanish teacher organized a trip to Mexico for us to live in a household, take courses, and go on excursions.

In middle and high school, my mother enrolled me in the local university’s federal TRIO program, which included the middle school Youth Towards Excellence Program (YTEP) and high school Upward Bound Programs. These programs were held at the local university’s campus and were composed of all Black participants and staff. It was here that I gained friends and mentors who looked like me, which wasn’t something I could find at the public school I attended. This program was a part of my village, as I received academic support and advice, encouragement and opportunities, such as travel and employment, that enabled me to develop my leadership skills. These programs were instrumental in encouraging me to achieve my academic goals and aspirations, especially as I was a first-generation college student.

During college, I found myself leading a group known as Minority Future Educators Association, working as a Resident Assistant/Apartment Manager, assistant in the campus’s cultural center and more. I was also recruited to work with a local Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom School® program one summer, and within this program, my entire approach to educating Black and Brown youth shifted, and not only through my classroom interactions, but from building authentic relationships with students and families to find ways to build joy. Finding out students’ interests; their families’ gifts, backgrounds, and needs; and the students’ home lives and communities helped me to home in on each student’s assets. As the only Black female classroom teacher during my tenure in that role in an elementary classroom, my Black students often felt comfortable venting to me about issues with peers or at home. and we formed lasting relationships over the years. Other teachers would often send “misbehaved” students to my classroom for “timeouts,” and I would have a heart-to-heart with them in “an othermotherly tone,” which would set them back on track. From this, other students throughout the school heard about me and knew that I cared. These characteristics are often common among Black educators and provide a sense of home and care to students.

All of these experiences pushed me to have high expectations for my students, celebrate each of their individual wins and strengths, and foster creativity and individuality. They gave me practice providing hands-on opportunities for cooperative group learning, incorporating interdisciplinary learning and multiple intelligences, and making learning culturally relevant. As a first-generation college student, my community and opportunities equipped me in so many ways. Tapping into community resources to engage families and communities was something that I prioritized with my students as these shaped my own disposition and I personally knew the power they could have on children and families.

Recommendations for the Field (Special & Literacy Education)
Facilitating Black Joy Within Special Education

Preserve Collectivist Culture

As it relates to Black students and their family values, the traditional IEP process is designed with individualistic white, dominant cultural norms that often misalign with the collectivist structure of Black and minority families (Greene & Nefsky, 1999; Valenzuela & Martin, 2005). What we know for sure is that in Black collectivist culture, identity is shaped and defined by the family and the community; therefore, when intersecting skills such as self-determination, self-awareness, and self-advocacy we can cultivate Black Joy by opening the process to be inclusive of culture. Research has shown the effectiveness of student-led IEPs particularly in the improvement of student self-efficacy and self-perception (Ann Bross & Craig, 2022; Martin, et.al, 2006).

As Black educologists, we can affirm students in their Blackness and facilitate joy by providing opportunities early and often for students to lead their IEP meetings. This space is a novel opportunity for students to exercise their agency and culture sharing. In the spirit of affirming Black student voice and participation in their education, implementing the practice of student-led IEPs maintains a student-centered focus (Greene & Nefsky, 1999). Allowing students to practice leadership skills by leading their own IEP meetings is an authentic way to cultivate Black Joy. As students are given the opportunity to lead the discussion they are focused on their needs, able to self-assess their progress, and consider the necessary steps to reaching their goals (Ann Bross & Craig, 2022; Valenzuela & Martin, 2005). Positioning students to lead their meeting means we must affirm them in their knowledge of self, interaction with their community (school and local), and ability to lead the meeting. While there are multiple online resources that include IEP leadership steps and sample conversational phrases students can access, we believe it is necessary to understand, with consideration for cultural communication styles, that there may
be a preference for the student to lead a less scripted meeting. In this case, students may use the leadership steps as a guideline for the discussion.

Student-led IEPs naturally align with Universal Design for Learning’s (UDL’s) principles of multiple means of representation, action and expression and multiple means of engagement (Meyer, et. al, 2014). Using UDL as a framework provides Black educologists with additional guidelines for alternative ways to communicate and represent the information, choosing different ways to help students and their families understand the information and actively engage in the process. Suggestions include diagrams, the use of digital presentations, such as PowerPoint or Google Slides, and symbols and charts that share the key points of the IEP. The use of student friendly, culturally inclusive, non-technical jargon also removes the language barrier to understanding of the information. For example, the current levels of performance can be presented answering the question, “How am I doing this semester?” or “How is my child doing academically?” (Ann Bross & Craig, 2022; Valenzuala & Martin, 2005). As students lead their IEP meetings, another empowering practice is to also allow them to select work to share as samples of their progress, again cultivating an affirmation of ability. Allowing the use of these resources and alternative formats create a bridge between the technicalities of the special education programming and what’s often felt as a disconnection between the school, student, and family (Gay, 2002; Williams Shealey, et. al, 2011).

Emphasize Assets in Understanding Learner Differences

While we Black educologists find it important to address ways to cultivate Black Joy within special education programming, it is also important to emphasize our position on the disruption of inequities that are both historically and presently experienced by Black students and their families perpetuated in current practices within the special education processes for referral (Annamma et. al, 2018, Gay, 2002; Losen, 2018; Williams Shealey et. al, 2011). Thus, we must center student, family and community assets in our attempt to dissolve the disproportionate representation of Black students in special education programs and the disproportionate disciplinary consequences for Black students identified with (dis)abilities (Gallagher, et.al., 2023; Losen, 2018). It should be noted that our description of recommendations in this section are not only applicable to Black students identified with (dis)abilities, but also are practices that could prevent disproportionate representation in said programming.

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) is a framework used in schools to provide students with a continuum of evidence-based interventions and supports with the aim to improve social, academic, behavioral outcomes for all students. To cultivate Black joy within the MTSS, educators must use equity focused, critical frameworks to plan, evaluate and implement support, intervention and services for Black students (Annamma, et. al, 2018; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). This looks like educator decisions that consciously consider biases or inequities, take stock of various perspectives, consider challenges and opportunities, imagine equitable and just outcomes, brainstorm immediate-term solutions and long-term solutions, and craft an inclusive plan of action (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). As it relates to students already receiving services, by design, most school districts adopt an online program used as a guide for the special education referral and qualification process. While compliance is necessary, this traditional way of communicating and developing the IEP can feel like a barrier between team members including the student and their family. Ultimately, the process can feel like an emphasis on what the student can’t do compared to their same-age peers.

Shifting the organizational structure and changing the design of the IEP would create an opportunity to highlight what students do well beyond categorical strengths. Cultivating Black Joy within this practice includes programming that truly views students as their authentic selves and not a problem to be fixed. This would boost confidence and create holistic representation of these students (Gay, 2002). Strengths based IEPs are an opportunity to interrupt the cultural discontinuity described in the literature as the expected values in the school system that differ from the values of the student and their family (Van Horn, 2000). With a strengths-based approach to the IEP, the team collaborates with the student and considers content beyond cognition and academic content. Student strengths include social emotional learning as well as the student’s background. Practices include (Valenzuala & Martin, 2005; Digital Promise, n.d; Wehmeyer, 2013):

1. Start with empathy and letting go of judgment based on white cultural norms. Understand that students have unique strengths outside of traditional categories. For example: creativity, compassion, mindfulness, curiosity or spirituality. Use those strengths to brainstorm supporting areas of growth.
2. Consider student interests and actively brainstorm ways to use hobbies to support development of goals and accommodations again, intersecting academic achievement with student well-being.
3. Truly value student point input on each component of the planning process: present levels of performance, goal planning, and accommodations.

Note: While this is a mandated aspect of the planning process, students have typically been passively engaged.

A whole-child, strengths-based approach considers the context in which the student is progressing in addition to a flexible understanding of strengths. This begins with a conversation with the student about what is going well and where they think they need help. It is both affirming and empowering to feel actively included in a process that has historically been isolated based on the practitioner’s expertise and technical evaluation tools.

**Facilitating Black Joy Within Literacy Education**

**Family & Community Engagement**

As we consider best practices for building an ecosystem of Black Joy within literacy instruction, we must implement ways to involve families and the greater community as a whole. Black educologists must consider ways outside of formal educational spaces to maximize literacy engagement and opportunities for students. Community equity literacy is an approach that examines aspects of leadership preparation for community engagement (Green & Rodgers, 2019). School leaders must truly examine their practices. These include partnering with, supporting, and highlighting church/faith-based and other community agencies that provide afterschool and summer enrichment opportunities. Morrow (2020) describes family literacy as the ways that parents, children, and extended family members learn and use literacy at home and in their community, often as part of routines of daily living. In the spirit of Black community, we have to celebrate and affirm our Black children as much as possible. By cultivating community spaces of belongingness that allow for authentic chances for students to connect academic literacy content to home literacies through writing and reading opportunities we bridge the gaps between home and school. Some examples of these are the national CDF Freedom Schools® program, which is a summer literacy program that encourages a love of reading and learning through a culturally diverse curriculum. The Integrated Reading Curriculum affirms scholars with engaging literature and exposure to the broader community through addressing an array of local and global social justice topics. Other common activities that Black children participate in and love, such as theater, step, poetry, recitals, concerts/musicals, and other performances can be intentionally scaffolded into focused and meaningful literacy opportunities. Having students construct pieces, write reflections, and discuss and analyze corresponding Black literature and art that connect to these activities can not only deepen their background knowledge, but build their cultural as well as overall comprehension. In addition, introducing new activities such as quick recall, debate, and more can expand students' horizons and provide them with even more extended opportunities to bridge school-community literacies. Throughout these activities, educators should foster students' home languages and dialects, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or as Wynter-Hoyte, et al., (2019) observe, African American Language (AAL) as opposed to AAVE, Black English, or African American English because it emphasizes AAL as a language not a vernacular (nonstandard) or a dialect, which, for many educators, implies something “less than a standard language variety” (Spears, 2015, p. 786). Though often discouraged in the school spaces and pushed to only use Standard American English (SAE) or what some refer to as “academic language”—or as Wynter Hoyte et al. (2019) observe, “standardized English, abbreviated as sE to communicate that the language is not innately Standard,” but it is standardized in attempts to sustain “social stratification and [maintain] the interests of privileged groups” (Watson, 2018, n.p.). Should we support AAL in communal spaces and connect to SAE, as well as teach how to proficiently code-switch across spaces? Gumperz (1973) referred to code-switching as the alternate use of two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation. Johnson et al. (2023) note that unlike previous studies that suggest for there to be an increased likelihood of students struggling with reading skills if they did not decrease their use of AAL after first grade, Craig and Washington, (2004, 2006) found this not to be the case for children who frequently code-switched. When considering the implications associated with the deficit views of AAVE/AAL, Johnson et al., (2023) concluded:

It is important for school psychologists to incorporate AAVE into their assessment practices, as there are virtually no standardized assessment procedures that account for the use of AAVE in African American students. Given this, these assessment practices unfairly disadvantage African American students (p.11).

In conclusion, valuing community programming and encouraging home literacies facilitates opportunities for students to feel validated, which promotes Black Joy and pride.
Represent for Black Joy, Even in Predominantly White Spaces

Among Black educologists, it often feels as if we are “preaching to the choir” when it comes to discussing best practices for how to support our Black students and facilitate opportunities to foster Black joy. We get it. Those who often don’t get it are often those from drastically different backgrounds and that hold tight to hegemonic and traditional norms of schooling and educational practices. For example, research throughout the years has confirmed the unpreparedness of predominantly white female teachers to work with the growing diverse student populations, especially Black youth within urban contexts (Leland & Murtadha, 2011; Matias, 2013; Schaffer et al., 2014).

Black educators and allies of liberatory practices (Closson et al., 2014) must continue to resist dominant educational structures rooted in whiteness, through the constant advocacy of Black Joy through our dispositions, research, practices, and approaches. Just as it is important to ensure representation and inclusive practices within literacy education materials, training, and teaching among Black student contexts, it’s just as if not even more important to ensure these within predominantly white contexts as well. Children of all backgrounds need to be exposed to diverse characters and texts to gain more understanding and awareness of others, and/or to see themselves represented. This aids with children developing cultural awareness, sensitivity, and tolerance early on and with reducing levels of ignorance, deficit ideologies/views, and more for other identities outside of their own. Originally coined by Style (1988) as the idea of “windows and mirrors” within children’s books, Bishop (1990) extended this idea to include “sliding glass doors,” and noted:

Books should be windows into the realities of others, not just imaginary worlds, and books can be mirrors that reflect the lives of readers. Sliding glass doors refers to how readers can walk into a story and become part of the world created by the author-readers become fully immersed in another experience (p. 7).

Through our continued push for culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Gay, 2002) especially within literacy and language education, it is essential that beginning at primary through college levels, we are providing and exposing children all the way up to preservice teachers to authentic, hands-on experiences to view CRP in action. This and hopefully they have opportunities to engage directly as well, so that they gain the confidence to interact with others and specifically preservice teachers, develop the understanding of these inclusive approaches on a deeper level prior to graduation and becoming literacy educators within their own classrooms.

Conclusion

Our hope is that the dialogue from this call to action, which prioritizes Black Joy, continues across K–12 contexts and disciplines as we continue to research ways to celebrate and affirm our students. As educators from two different content areas, we recognize the distinctiveness of our fields, but also how the two areas overlap conceptually when considering best practices for Black youth. Literacy acquisition is often a praxis used to marginalize Black and Brown students who cannot perform in the context of standardized practices, behaviors and ways of knowing (Gallagher, et.al., 2023; Losen, 2018; Valenzuala & Martin, 2005). We offer our insights as a disruption to this carceral logic that measures student ability to perform smartness in the context of a system and structure rooted in the white, able-bodied culture (Annamma, 2018; Beneke, et al., 2022; Closson et al., 2014). We promote building an ecosystem of shared power, positioning the students and their local context at the center. We recommend practices that promote interdependence and community care; text that goes beyond SAE and includes home languages, multiple modes of representation, action, expression and engagement (Meyer, et. al, 2014; Watson, 2018, n.p.). We elevate asset framed individual education programs that emphasize the variability of learning and ways of knowing, using students’ strengths to engage in the work toward areas of growth. Let’s continue to promote collaborative interdisciplinary research and analysis of practice that center Black voices, educational approaches, and joy.

Note: In the same way Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2016) utilize the term dis/ability, we utilize it here to “1. Counter the emphasis on having a whole person be represented by what [they] cannot do, rather than what [they] can, and 2. Disrupt notions of the fixity and permeance of the concept of disability, seeing rather to analyze the entire context in which a person functions” (p. 1). We use the phrase students identified with (dis)abilities as a reminder that special education is structured so that (in most cases) able-bodied school personnel that have not experienced physical, cognitive, emotional, etc. (dis)abilities are tasked with identifying (dis)abilities in/of children, and this raises issues of student agency.
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