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Black Teacher, Black Mommy: Co-Conspirators for Equity in American Public Schools  

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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.

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ABSTRACT

This narrative piece is a reflection of one Black mother’s experience with navigating the public education system in a large city in the United States. The author explores the humbling and often powerless moments she feels as an educator with over 21 years of experience, yet also as a first-time mother of a Black girl. She discusses the impactful Black teachers and other co-conspirators who helped to advocate for her and her daughter, Aya, during their schooling journey thus far. She concludes by referring back to her own father’s text, which outlines a framework for transformational education for Black children and families.

That day was probably the second or third time I had left the school in tears. Not tears of sadness, but tears of joy. Comforted by the fact that I knew that my baby girl had a guardian to keep an eye out for her. Mrs. G and I just so happened to run into each other in the parking lot. I mentioned that I had been trying to connect with her teachers because I had a few things that I wanted to touch base about. “Is everything ok?” Mrs. G asked. Mrs. G was the new director at my daughter’s preschool. A Black-identifying woman of color.

While overall the school was diverse, it was still predominantly white. Before responding to Mrs. G, I had to think of the best way to address my concerns. I also had to be sure to separate out old trauma I may have potentially been internalizing. Childhood memories of being the only Black girl at a predominantly White school. Memories of feeling alienated, silenced, and unacknowledged, in the curriculum and by my teachers. My memories of being misidentified as having special needs, just like the other Black children in the school at the time.

“Aya mentioned that nobody wanted to play with her, and I just wanted to follow-up and find out if everything was ok and how we could encourage more social interaction.” Mrs. G responded. “Oh no, I can definitely understand your concern.” As my fellow sister of color, I felt comfortable sharing with her my own childhood experience. “I love her teachers and they do a great job, but one day I also noticed Ms. L was doing the other girls’ hair after nap. But not Aya’s. She’s done Aya’s once or twice, and I know that is not her job, but I also do not want her to feel excluded.” Mrs. G stepped closer and put her hand on my shoulder. “I also know what it’s like to be the only Black girl. Of course, I look out for all of our children, but I especially try to keep an eye out on our little girls of color.” “Thank you, Mrs. G,” I said, fighting back tears of gratitude. I was so grateful that someone else also understood those nuances, which can often be overlooked—“not a big deal” in the eyes of others who have not felt the long-term impacts that such experiences can have on academic confidence and self-concept.

Months later, just as Mrs. G had looked out for me, I was grateful to be able to respond to her request for support in hosting the preschool’s first ever “Black History Month Celebration.” Mrs. G set various learning centers in the school parking lot. All of the tables included various Black history activities. I led the African jewelry beading station. As the little ones stepped up to the table, I was able to explain the importance of beading and the African liberation colors of red, black, and green. It was wonderful to see the children and families laughing, exploring, and learning important content about Black history together. At one point, Mrs. G and I gave each other a quiet nod and smile from across that parking lot, the unspoken look that said, “we did this… together.”

I have since learned that my experience with Mrs. G was a rare and unique synergy. When Aya entered first grade in a local public school, the sad reality of the challenges that would lie ahead for her as a Black girl in public schools became painfully apparent.
The Lonely Road of Black Parent Advocacy

“Mommy, this is enough parent conferences,” Aya said as we rushed out the door to head over to the school. She was right, this was possibly the fifth or sixth parent conference that I had requested with the teacher, and this time, finally, I had gotten the principal and the teacher together. Of the conferences we had already had, only one of them was the “standard” conference that the school offered to review grades and discuss academic progress.

As an educator who had spent the last 21 years as an elementary school teacher, professor of teacher preparation, and a dean of a school of education, I had committed my life to teaching. Yet somehow, I could not figure out how to help my first-grade child excel in our local public school. She had received a D in language and an F in math on her mid-year report card. I did not share these grades with her because I had already witnessed the plethora of possible spirit-breaking incidents that could have wiped away her self-confidence. “Does my child have a behavioral problem?” I asked, as Aya came home repeatedly mentioning that the teacher had moved her seat. Immediately, I thought of the extensive body of research on the over-discipline of Black boys and girls (Peterson, 2021; Sabol et. Al., 2022; Welsh & Little, 2018). I had served on the school organizational team the previous year and learned that Black children were 19% of the school population but 40% of the disciplinary issues. “She has a hard time staying focused,” the teacher responded. “So, is she being disrespectful?” I asked. I knew my daughter was not perfect, but I also knew she loved to learn, and she was not a disrespectful child. I saw her rapidly losing that love of learning, and my heart broke more every day. When she told me, “Mommy I don’t feel cared for,” the tears swelled in my eyes. “Where was Mrs. G?” I thought. Sadly, there was no Mrs. G there, no allies to help me advocate.

Report card after report card, things got worse. Yet when examining the quantitative scoring of my child, I found that there were no qualitative comments to be found anywhere. There was no documentation of the fact that her teacher had “retired” on September 20th and my daughter was placed in another teacher’s classroom until December 14th. When I asked for a conference with the new teacher in October, I was told I would have to wait because the other teacher would be returning as a “critical needs” teacher within a 6–8-week period. When I asked whether the two teachers had collaborated on the students’ grades, the answer I received was short and to the point: “No.”

You can understand the panic, anger, and frustration I felt when I had the record of Class Dojo messages in which I was seeking updates on my child’s progress and the minimal input I received that her report card would have failing grades. Of course, as a reflective practitioner, I had to delve into what we as a family were doing to support our child at home.

After all, I was the co-author of the book Social Justice and Parent Partnerships in Multicultural Education Contexts (Norris & Collier, 2018). I suppose I had to humbly throw myself off of my high horse. I went down the list of what I knew were best practices, which I had taught to hundreds of teachers, principals, and school leaders over the years. Was I reading and checking Dojo regularly? Yes. Was I maintaining open lines of communication? Yes. Was I doing the suggested 20 minutes of homework? Yes. I also read with my daughter every night. I provided mini-lessons on literacy comprehension, phonic, and phonemic awareness.

When I had studied under Lucy Calkins at Teachers College, Columbia University, I had learned that writing should be meaningful. I tried not to focus on handwriting but rather instilling the craft of storytelling in my daughter. Unfortunately, paper after paper came home lined with the ink of those red markers, so I quickly pivoted. I began to observe that the evidence-based practices that I had studied and taught my teacher preparation students for the last 20 years were not what was valued at my daughter’s school. As worksheet after worksheet came home, I began focusing on handwriting only. I also hired a tutor because my daughter was resistant to me teaching her certain subjects. At our third conference, the first one with the new teacher, she apologized. “I have a really difficult class this year,” she said. As a teacher advocate, I tried to empathize. I knew that the teacher shortage and exodus was exacerbating post-COVID-19 discipline and mental health issues. However, the documented assessments did not reflect any of these realities. They also did not reflect the social world my daughter was navigating as a Black girl. While few of the teachers in the school were Black, she did have Ms. H, a young Black woman I was hoping to recruit into our teaching program who I jokingly called her the “Safekey guardian angel.” As I picked Aya up one day, she pulled me to the side. “Mrs. C, you need to tell your little one to not allow others to speak unkindly to her. Jill speaks to her in a tone that I do not like.” I was grateful that Ms. H was protective of my daughter. I was perplexed by the fact that my daughter was often a leader in contexts in which she had diverse peers but a follower in predominantly white contexts. But that is another paper entirely.
As the year progressed, day after day, I asked my daughter what she had learned in school that day and what was the highlight of her day, she would simply say, “The highlight is you Mommy.” “Baby,” I would say, “are you having morning meetings?” “Did you get to talk about your weekend?” “Did you get to talk about your Spring Break?” “Do you ever work in groups?” “Do you sing songs?” Her light, that inquisitive mind, her passion for learning were quickly flickering out.

How did we get to this point, I asked myself? I began to log on to Infinite Campus, the school district’s learning management system, on a weekly basis to review my daughter’s grades. It broke my heart that I had to focus only on grades for my first grader. I had learned throughout my education that authentic assessments were extremely valuable: informal reading inventories and portfolios of students’ work. I had learned that allowing students to have a table partner to help support if they are confused was also a useful strategy; but everything I learned seemed useless. The only assessment being used was the numbers on Aya’s report card and the scores of standardized tests. I double-checked the very short parent newsletter the teacher would send. “Am I overlooking something?” I asked myself. I began to read on the school’s website like it was a dissertation, closely examining every policy. You must submit the attendance form through the official Google form, not send a note on Class Dojo, I learned. I discovered little rules and expectations that were never clearly articulated by the teacher or the school. My heart broke even more. What about the families that do not speak English? What about the families that cannot afford a tutor? How were they able to succeed amid this maze of red tape, especially during a teacher shortage and exodus?

**Toward African- and BIPOC-Centered Learning Spaces**

This disconnect between what I had learned education should be and what it actually is for Black children has me at a unique career crossroad, especially as a Black parent. This year, Aya is in the second grade, and although she is doing better at her new school, I am still seeing the same systemic issues: over-assessed, culturally despondent school cultures, minimal teacher diversity, and the over-reliance on computer programs that teach our children little more than to bow to the status quo of white mainstream America. While I see glimmers of transformative practices, my heart can see that we must create the schools that we want to see.

I recently returned to my father’s book *The Phoenix Arising: A Psychocultural Analysis on African American Issues up to the 21st Century*. He argues that in order for Black children and families to have a transformative education we must provide spaces for Black families to:

- Engage in introspection about who we are and where we are from
- Realigning values, attributes, and behaviors
- Re-education, especially about African diasporic history
- Relationship enhancement
  - Between mates
  - Between parents and their children
  - Between friends
- Revitalization of the extended family
- Reconnection with and reinvigoration of community
- Reclarification of belief systems, specifically
  - Love
  - Commitment
  - Sacrifice

For belief systems, he aligned with the principles of the Nguzo Saba, as outlined by Dr. Maulana Karanga, arguing that they provide a strong template for character development and community-based advocacy for Black families. These principles are as follows:

- *Umoja (Unity)*
  - To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race
- *Kujichagulia (Self-Determination)*
Black Educology 5

- Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)
- Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics)
- Nia (Purpose)
- Kuumba (Creativity)
- Imani (Faith) (Collier, 1992)

As I read these words and reflect on the principles my father outlined, I am reminded of the importance of the work we do in the home to prepare our youth to navigate a school system that was not designed for their success. I am reminded that Black history is not limited to a month. That teaching our children Black history and African-centered principals must occur daily from the day they leave the womb to the moment they step into public schools and well into adulthood. Additionally, we are still feeling the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on the Black family. As a result, it is imperative that we redefine family and recalibrate to create community, especially, in school spaces. Also, regardless of race it is the job of ALL teachers to serve as the bridge from home to school for students AND it is also the job of parents to inform teachers of the value systems and principles that are integral and important to you and your family.

I remain committed to diversifying the teacher population and the relentless pursuit of the transformative education our children deserve. However, I am in the early stages of creating my own school, using these guiding principles to develop a space where I know children like Aya can shine. In the meantime, I remain grateful for the Mrs. Gs, the Ms. Hs, the sacred network of guardians keeping our children safe: the Black teachers, the Black parents, the Black aunts and uncles, the Black community as we fight daily for our children’s educational rights. As I build the school and remain committed to creating these alternate learning spaces, the words of Beyonce’s “Bigger” resound in my heart and mind on a daily basis:

“Let love be the water
I pour into you and you pour into me
There ain't no drought here
Bloom into our actual powers
I'll be your sanctuary, you just don't know it yet
You just don't know it yet
No matter how hard it gets
You got my blood in ya
And you're gonna rise
You're part of something way bigger
You're part of something way bigger”
–Beyonce (2019)

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Notes on Contributor

Dr. Shartriya Collier, is Interim Dean of the Nevada State University School of Education. She is also the author and co-author of five books, including a children’s book, and a variety of academic journal articles. Her works emphasize social justice, self-development, and multicultural education, as well as highlighting the experiences of communities of color, women and other marginalized groups.
References


