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Making Us Matter & the Work Of Spirit Revival

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Notes From The Field

Making Us Matter & the Work Of Spirit Revival

By Eghosa Obaizamomwan-Hamilton[*] and T. Gertrude Jenkins[**]

This Is The Problem

Last year I (Eghosa) received an email from my principal: *"I wanted to chat with you about ideas for Black History Month in February and how I may work with members of our staff and students to create a meaningful message."* These are the types of emails that produce the Black teacher's proverbial side-eye. Black History is but a micro-moment of celebration across this country but on school campuses it inevitably becomes a moment that ironically illuminates anti-Blackness. It is one of

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the only times (aside from slavery lessons in history classes) where Black bodies are highlighted. It is also one of the only times Black teachers are consulted (aside from occasions of overt racism) to weigh in on school-wide issues. In her attempt to make Black History Month "meaningful," this principal inadvertently highlighted how deeply rooted anti-Blackness is at our school site and in schooling across the United States. The inherent desire to appear as though Blackness is valued (but only during the month of February) is dispiriting.

It is in these moments that I am reminded that my 13 years of experience in the field of education is often dwindled down to how I can contribute to issues of race, equity, and inclusion. To only be called upon when Black students aren't passing standardized testing or when some kid uses graffiti to bring back de facto segregation by distinguishing a water fountain for White[1] students and another for Black students,[2] is to discount and devalue all that I contribute. It is the same way Black students feel after being "represented" for one unit or lesson before being put back on the sidelines for the "classics". Our value should be meaningful every day. *Period*. Our history, culture, and existence should be emphasized and embedded into every aspect of school. We are too impactful to just simply be a blip in the curriculum and then return to the status quo.

The current educational spiral consists of performative or failed attempts to acknowledge the existence of Black students and teachers. I have witnessed attempts to do culturally responsive teaching, restorative justice, anti-defamation, or equity and inclusion work over the years, only

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[1] *Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see here): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.*

[2] Racist Graffiti at California High School

to be met each time with resistant teachers, parents, and administrators who are uncomfortable with conversations around race. The conversations around the trauma caused by the many racist incidents on our own campus have been met with, (1) the need to protect students who committed racist acts under the assumption that there is no "intentional" racism; (2) overt ignoring of a hate speech written on our walls because "they were removed by custodial services;" (3) and the "I didn't know how much this would impact students," which reflects the utter failure to understand and recognize the weight of racial trauma faced by Black students and teachers. All of these attempts to recognize and humanize Blackness have fallen short because no real structural change has taken place. I am left pondering, what ongoing or lasting shift will be made within our hiring practices, curriculum, or punitive, racially-biased response to students of different backgrounds? The last meeting I attended to address racial issues on campus consisted of our principal, superintendent, equity coordinator, board members, the leadership teacher, and a representative from the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). All the "stakeholders" were there and I watched as students told stories of the harm they felt when their teacher read the N-word freely in class, or when their classmate uploaded a video to Snapchat calling Black people "vermin," or how tiring it is to constantly be pulled out of class to share these stories over and over again. Schools continue to put the burden on Black students and teachers by having them share their experiences in front of an audience, and it usually ends there. This stagnated progress is debilitating.

And just so we're clear, anti-Blackness isn't relegated to majority White and integrated spaces. To borrow the words of poet Sunni Patterson, "it ain't just burnin' in Mississippi, it's hot wherever you be."[3] After all, anti-Blackness is a global issue, not one born from integrated schooling. To be a Black student or educator in the United States is to suffer through a constant stream of systemic violence for the sake of privilege. With all of this suffering and wounding, we are still expected to go on and succeed

[3] Sunni Patterson - We Made It

without having the time or space to acknowledge our own wounds. Instead we are given an apology and put on an equity team for the wounded. But no one is really willing to help us heal that wound. We've learned we can't go anywhere to prevent this violence from happening so we stay isolated or assimilate. I am tired of seeing us forced to work through these wounds, pretending they don't exist no matter how battered and ugly they become.

Towards A Solution

The question then becomes, how do we re-spirit our communities? It's not about popping up in politically correct moments, but permanently embedding the importance of Black voices and representation in our schools. We (Eghosa and Gertrude) co-founded Making Us Matter (M.U.M.) as an integral step towards the need to re-spirit Black students and teachers.

We provide challenging and empowering educational opportunities for high school students, free of microaggressions in an environment where they can experience full humanization and visibility. We are also committed to reshaping the experience of Black educators; Making Us Matter creates a space where their voices are consistently valued (not just when overt racism erupts) and their freedom to create culturally-informed curriculum is respected.

Our virtual model taps into Critical Race Theory with a focused goal on connecting Black educators and students across the country (and eventually, the globe). We work one-on-one with educators to help them develop a social justice curriculum that builds on student knowledge and increases cognitive skill sets. Some of our featured course offerings are Hip Hop Ed, Financial Literacy, Art Activism, and The Art of Self-Love. Currently, M.U.M classes are offered on Saturdays as a supplement to the instruction our students already receive in their traditional school settings. While our classes are exclusively taught by Black educators, we welcome students of all backgrounds.

The unavoidable truth is that the institution of education wasn't meant for us; the needs of Black students are rarely emphasized. In

response to this bleak reality, we've created our own educational space that seeks to empower and humanize Blackness through trauma healing and self-knowledge. At its core, we aimed to create an educational platform that (1) positions Black teachers as beacons of wisdom and innovation, (2) unpacks dominant messages of Anti-Blackness, and (3) helps students strengthen their voices and sense of community advocacy.

Why This Work Matters

When the racial pandemic hit peak trauma levels in the middle of our second M.U.M. session in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd (May, 2020) and Breonna Taylor (March, 2020) at the hands of police, there was no need to have a meeting or send an email out to our educators about what to do. There was an intrinsic understanding among us that the curriculum needed to be modified to address the anti-Black violence being inflicted and digitally consumed[4] at high rates. Our collective of Black educators (some who are not traditional educators with credentials) didn't need Black History Month to push them towards shifting their lessons. Their unique perspectives and life experiences shaped their curriculum-building organically. Our educators knew on a *spiritual* level that they needed to take a pause and discuss the killing of George Floyd. They knew they needed to discuss the idea of who is deemed a threat with the Amy Cooper incident.[5] They knew they needed to show clips of Tamika Mallory's powerful speech on who's really looting in this country. In fact, three of our teachers showed different sections of that speech and asked students to

[4] Digital Lynching; a term explored by Whitneé Garrett-Walker, see https://www.huffpost.com/entry/stop-posting-videos-of-black-death_n_5f7f601bc5b664e5babaebdf

[5] On May 25, 2020, a confrontation between Amy Cooper, a White woman walking her dog, and Christian Cooper (no relation), a black birdwatcher, in a section of New York City's Central Park known as the Ramble ended with Amy Cooper calling 9-1-1. She falsely presented herself as "in danger" and Christian Cooper as a threatening Black man. Amy Cooper was later charged with filing a false police report but this incident, which happened the same day as the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police Department officers.

analyze and grapple with her message. All this happened *uncoordinated*. Understand the beauty in that. Black folks, mostly without their formal teaching credential, instinctively knew what to do and how to humanize Blackness in the middle of chaos.

That is the difference. There is no need to try to make the curriculum meaningful or highlight Black voices during Black History Month when you have Black educators at the helm. The emphasis on Blackness isn't relegated to Black History Month as an abbreviation or a blip. After over ten years of working within a profession that attempts to minimize our existence, the only decision that made sense was to take matters into our own hands. Why scream incessantly into the void when you can create your own arena? Our faculty of eight (with a host of guest teachers) built a community where it was safe for us to check in and acknowledge the racial trauma happening around us, a microaggression-free space to collectively build curriculum, and the ability to cultivate an unfettered connection and solidarity as Black citizens. Before we transform, we need to be able to release the weight of our pain and to emancipate our stories so that we may find validation and safety in our communities.

The act of reclaiming our histories and identities are ways in which we can use our bodies as a means of knowledge and theory building. The Black body is full of stories, language, fight, resilience, pain, success, heartbreak, creativity, and innovation. However, in traditional school settings, we only receive a fraction of the narrative (often a false fraction, at that). At Making Us Matter, we believe that it's time to change the narrative; in fact, we're past due. Black people have endured capture, colonization, torture, terrorism, and continued systemic oppression. And we still manage to create the blueprints that the world copies down and then denies where it came from. We created civilizations from dirt under newly-freed feet, financial powerhouses from zero generational wealth. We outperform in pretty much every field we master from the Arts to the Sciences. How great would it be for Black students to learn all this before they make it to graduate school? This is the art of re-spiriting ourselves; not only during a racial pandemic, but indefinitely; "there can be no liberation without education. Education that fails to steer us in the direction of

liberation is not truly education. It may be training, it may be knowledge, but it is not truly education. Education, it seems to me, is about the collective cultivation of the mind, the spirit and the body" (Davis, 2017).[6] We utilize the injustices around us to develop critical thinking, making us an educational organization that is in direct conflict with the faux neutrality propagated in most schools across the United States.

In Their Own Words

We toil to produce young minds that challenge inequities and burst through the ceiling of marginalization that's been slammed down upon us for generations. If we do this right, we have the potential to cultivate a generation of students who are informed, unapologetic, and ready to take action. That's what makes this dangerous work.

But don't just take it from us. Our success in achieving these gains is best expressed through the words of our students. The following excerpts demonstrate how essential it is to ensure that Black teachers have the pedagogical freedom needed to remove the shackles of cold, White gaze and allow Black students (and arguably, all students) the freedom to envision new systems and ways of being, while dismantling those that do not equitably serve.

Seeing Black Teachers As Beacons of Wisdom & Innovation

> *"You are one of my favorite teachers I have ever had; you are an awesome Black woman who doesn't give a crap what other people think of you and I love your classes. You teach a lot about Black women and I like that a lot. You are definitely a feminist and it shows in your class and I think that is really cool because not only do most schools not teach about Black people, but they don't teach about*

[6] Dr. Angela Davis, a civil rights activist, spoke at Olympic College's inaugural event for its Presidential Equity and Excellence series on Jan. 11, 2017. Full video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqeeVFsZyVk

women so it is really cool that I can learn about both of those things in your classes and learn a lot about Black women. You are an awesome teacher and I am so honored to be your student." - (Hip Hop Ed Scholar)

As Black teachers, we've grown accustomed to constant second-guessing and challenges made against our professional expertise in racially mixed settings. Our stereotyped identities represent the antithesis of what is culturally accepted as "academic." In this regard, being confronted with a Black teacher (especially if you've never had one) can seem a bit oxymoronic. As members of predominantly White faculties, our color often gets muted and we are encouraged to "stick to the script." That's what makes this student's comment particularly significant. In traditional school settings it is unlikely that a student would feel free to expressly identify a teacher's race and sociopolitical leanings as a reason for teacher appreciation.

The "B-word" (Black) and the "F" word (Feminist) are considered impolite in mixed settings and depending on which region of the country you live in, could be grounds for being held in social contempt or even fired. I (Gertrude) experienced this first-hand. My choice to sit in solidarity with students in Georgia who peacefully protested against an act of anti-Blackness in the school resulted in my suspension pending a district investigation[7]. Even in the news coverage this incident received, I was invisibilized. There was no mystery behind my "absence", as the headline suggests; the word "absence" suggested that I'd had a choice. "Absence" shifted the blame away from all the anti-Black actors who didn't care for my overt activism and chose to sully my professional record because of it. Despite the politicization of my skin, I was accused of bringing my "politics" into the school. As if politics hadn't built the entire institution. I credit this experience as being the seed that gave life to the realization of a better way. I didn't know it then, but Making Us Matter was on the horizon. It's been

[7] Teacher missed classes after #BlackLivesMatter sit-in

incredibly liberating to develop a space where Black educators are free to not only allow the experience of their intersections to inform their pedagogy, but to also hold a space for students to unapologetically name this as a reason for enjoying learning. No one should be denied that.

Reckoning with Dominant Narratives

> *"Black girls are adultified by themselves - they see that they need to be strong and stand up for themselves, and so they do. They see the world treating them like adults who can handle more, so they are forced to see themselves as that, in order to survive. Black women and girls are forced to fend for themselves and each other, becoming what society is telling us that we are. They say that we are strong and can take care of ourselves, so they don't help us. Then, because we aren't' offered assistance by the rest of the world, we have create our own support" - (Art of Self Love Scholar)*

We hadn't planned it, but we were delighted to discover that all of our M.U.M Summer scholars were girls of color (majority, Black). Given our demographic, we found it crucial to restructure our course curriculum so that it included the unpacking of issues that were central to their identities. Although they are the focus of research less often than their male counterparts, Black girls are behaviorally penalized at statistically higher rates than their peers[8]. Black girls are adultified and critiqued at higher and harsher levels by their teachers. While this is known and felt by Black girls across the nation, there is rarely any open discussion about this experience in school (if at all). As a result, these dominant portrayals are often internalized.

There's a lot of talk in curriculum development circles about

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[8] Epstein, Rebecca & Blake, Jamilia & Gonzalez, Thalia. (2017). Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls Childhood. SSRN Electronic Journal accesses at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3000695

whether or not we should be providing our students with a mirrored curriculum (that allows them to see themselves) or a take a windowed approach (allowing students to examine the world beyond their four walls of existence)[9]. At Making Us Matter, we say, why not have both? In order for Black children to be free in navigating this world, it's imperative that they are able to see themselves, no matter where they direct their sails. Therefore, it is imperative for students to be able to grapple with stereotyped narratives so that they are able to speak truth to power, whenever they need to articulate it.

Finding Their Voices… and Then Using Them

> *"You have taught me so much about the environment I live in, my responsibilities toward sustaining it, and how I can advocate for others who aren't being given a voice to speak out about their living conditions. What I have learned from you will contribute to the rest of my life." - (Environmental Racism Scholar)*

Anyone who cares deeply about Black children or has had the distinct honor of having been one, knows that school can be a dangerous place for a Black child's voice and spirit. Everything that comes natural to us is criminalized[10]; we learn the lesson of quieting down or getting out. Not in this house! We want Black children to fall in love with the sound of their own voices and project them loudly. In the student quote, this scholar not only learned about the inequitable placement of Black and Brown communities in geographically hazardous areas, she was also inspired to make some change of her own. That's the ultimate goal. We want to foster an unapologetic uprising of voice and advocacy. We need Black children to

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[9] Style, Emily. 1996. "Curriculum as Window & Mirror." National Seeking Educational Equity & Diversity Project website. Accessed June 1, 2015. http://www.wcwonline.org/SEED/seed-curriculum-as-window-a-mirror.

[10] For example, Tamir Rice, Cyntoia Brown, and Tatyana Rhodes

understand that despite the messages they receive daily in traditional schools that they are bereft of intellectual capacity (or are an exception to the rule when their intellectual capacity is acknowledged), that they come from a rich ancestral culture of movement builders and change makers. Our experiences with the Making Us Matter summer scholars bleakly revealed that when you remove Black children from a traditional institutional setting, they will very much come to life and bring their voices with them, without hesitation.

Not Hopeful, Willful

Our ultimate objective as an organization is to surround ourselves with humanity and justice and to cultivate the need for an equitable world. We took a leap of faith and reimagined schooling for not only Black students, but also Black teachers. M.U.M. intends on shaping the future by ensuring that learning is a byproduct of the human experience and by growing the desire for learners to seek justice. It is on us to demand justice. To *be* justice. Making Us Matter is power for the people. Making Us Matter is for the people. Making Us Matter *is* the people. This is a space to acknowledge and heal trauma. A space to recognize, emphasize, and humanize Blackness.