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Culturally Responsive Schools

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# Historical Black Excellence Provides a Blueprint for Reimagining Education

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Recently, Qur'an Shakir, host of the American Muslim 360 radio show *The Power of Educating our Own*, asked me: "What lessons can we learn from our emancipated ancestors for the education of our children?" This question is a necessary and urgent one for U.S. schools, particularly because we have neglected historical Black excellence in the design of our education programs. In some of the largest school districts across the nation, frameworks, policies, standards and curriculum are devoid of the voices, scholarship, and histories of people of color.

It is not surprising that when we examine the educational achievement, we note that our Black and Brown children are not thriving to their full potential. Too often, the dehumanizing practices they experience in the classroom affect both their academic and life outcomes.

All citizens—educators, school leaders, parents and politicians—should be deeply concerned by

Racism and other oppressions children of color and their families experience.

Students being asked to check their identities at the schoolhouse gate.

Teacher education programs that typically do not help future teachers learn how to disrupt oppression like racism in the classroom.

Teacher education programs that teach theorists such as Dewey, Vygotsky and Piaget, but omit the scholarship and practice of educational theorists such as Carter G. Woodson, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary M. McLeod, or W.E.B. Dubois.

The lack of teacher education courses on Black educational history or Black excellence.

How too often the stories and histories of people of color start with struggle, when the focus should be on the *beauty and brilliance*.

The deficit stance that exists when labeling Black and Brown youth—calling them "at risk," "unmotivated," "defiant," "nonreaders," and the like.

References to "struggling students" and not "struggling instruction."

How the system, which includes the Common Core Standards, curriculum and instruction, teacher evaluation, and state assessments, is grounded in Eurocentrism and does not assess or hold teachers accountable for teaching in culturally relevant ways (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

For the past 10 years I have been studying the history of African American education and literacy development in the U.S. from the 19th century forward. Specifically, I have been looking closely into Black literary societies, which were developed by young Black men and women in the early 1800s around the disciplines of mathematics, science, history, and English language arts. These were some of our country's first reading and writing clubs. In these spaces, club members read diverse texts, wrote about critical issues affecting their lives, and debated sociopolitical issues. They kept libraries of rich and diverse texts that became their sources. I wanted to know what we could learn from this historical Black excellence to reshape and reframe our schools today. I quickly discovered that they left us a blueprint on what to do better.

I offer a list of 12 things we can learn from these early Black scholars, providing a roadmap to move us forward as we seek to improve and advance education.

1. Our ancestors provided more advanced standards for learning. They did not just focus on skills, but they also had standards on identity development, intellectualism, and critical thinking. Learning was always connected to cultivating identity and a sense of selfhood.
2. Today's schools privilege cognitive literacies, and world problems are often excluded from curriculum. Our ancestors, however, practiced literacy as reading and responding to the *word* and the *world* (social contexts).
3. Rather than broad but shallow learning, our ancestors sought to be scholars of their discipline. Cultivating genius was the goal. I found the words *genius* and *intellect* throughout African American 19th century writings.
4. In today's schools, individualism is central and honored. For Black people, learning has always been collaborative; a shared responsibility. Our ancestors learned in groups with mixed ages and "abilities," honoring the different pools of knowledge held in diverse configurations.
5. Our ancestors balanced subjective knowledge and objective knowledge, whereas today's schools privilege and almost exclusively test objective knowledge.
6. Frederick Douglass said that we must do all that can to agitate for equity and social justice. For our ancestors, this type of agitation was historically connected to education. Our ancestors involved and encouraged youth as leaders affecting change to curriculum, instruction, and policy. We must transform education, today, into a space where youth can agitate or disrupt oppression in their learning.
7. For our ancestors, pedagogy was urgent and responsive to the social times. In many classrooms today, curriculum is often prescriptive and remains unchanged for years.
8. Our ancestors cultivated libraries. Texts and libraries were the nucleus of all learning. Today, libraries are endangered spaces in schools and communities, and diverse authors are underrepresented.
9. Our ancestors centered and revered Black teachers and their experiences. Black teachers make up only **7 percent** of today's teaching force.
10. Our ancestors' pens were their most powerful weapons and tools against injustice. Writing was regarded as the highest intellectual exercise, never assigned or developed from prompts.
11. In the midst of the resistance and pain, our ancestors did not relinquish the experience of joy while learning.
12. Our ancestors didn't desire Eurocentricity. Instead, we wanted what we needed. This is a mindset we need to return to because it will allow for systems designed for us.



Intellectually invigorating and deeply humanizing education is urgently needed, especially for our students of color, to overcome decades of oppression and lost opportunity. We must interrogate and reframe our learning standards, curriculum, state assessments, and teacher evaluations to be aligned with *historically responsive education*. All children should experience the power and joy of self-discovery, and the expansion of the mind and heart to become their most excellent and brilliant selves. The lessons of our ancestors provide a perfect place to start.

## Reference

Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74–84.

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