

10-14-2023

An Equity Framework to Engage Community College Preservice Teachers in Black Liberatory Practices

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Recommended Citation

Farrelly, Denise; Maulbeck, Joanna; and Scheiber, Laura (2023) "An Equity Framework to Engage Community College Preservice Teachers in Black Liberatory Practices," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2023.18.2.3>

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Abstract

While representation of teachers of color remains startlingly low nationwide, it is critical to recognize that increasing diversity is not enough to increase access to an inequitable system. Centering the strengths of Black students, on both an individual and institutional level, through culturally and historically-responsive pedagogical and curricular practices is a crucial step toward equitizing the teaching workforce. Using a culturally and historically-responsive literacy (HRL) framework, we discuss and reflect upon practical classroom-based approaches to engage community college preservice teachers in responsive pedagogical practices that are aligned with the legacy of Black literary societies. The paper is divided into four sections, each one aligning with a layer of this equity framework. By reflecting on practices and experiences within our urban community college teacher education program, we share pragmatic strategies for centering Black liberatory practices with other scholar-practitioners in the field of teacher education, while simultaneously acknowledging pathways to improvement.

Keywords

Culturally-responsive pedagogy; Historically-responsive pedagogy; Teacher education; Community college; Urban education; Equity

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Introduction

Despite numerous city and statewide initiatives to diversify the teaching workforce in New York, Black teachers are still abysmally underrepresented at less than 18% (NYSED, 2021). Citywide programs such as NYC Men Teach aim to address the startlingly low representation of teachers who identify as men of color in the NYC Department of Education, with promising outcomes. While we recognize that increasing diversity can lead to dramatic improvements in schools' cultural responsiveness (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Partelow et al., 2017), it is not enough to increase access to an inequitable system where classrooms “too often demand that Black and Brown students shed their magic at the threshold of schooling in order to be palatable to whiteness” (Lyiscott, 2019). State and national standardized curriculum that is not written by Black educators or for Black students can act as hindrances toward cultivating the true genius that has existed for generations within Black teachers and learners. Teaching geniuses ‘charges teachers to cultivate their own genius that lies within them’ (Muhammad, 2020, p. 14). Historically, in the face of racist and oppressive conditions, Black people advanced their literacy skills and cultivated genius by coming together in collaborative spaces known as literary societies (Logan, 2008; McHenry, 2002). Through Muhammad’s (2020) culturally and historically-responsive literacy (HRL) framework, we can engage preservice teachers in culturally-responsive pedagogical practices and curriculum development processes that are aligned with the legacy of Black literary societies.

Centering the needs of Black students with high expectations must occur on both an individual and institutional level (Lyiscott, 2023). While state teaching standards across the nation all embed some elements of culturally-responsive teaching competencies, none explicitly address how low expectations are commonly connected to race and other marginalized statuses (Muniz, 2019). As such, in the winter of 2023, our NYC-based community college teacher education program faculty group came together to participate in a book club around Muhammad’s (2020) book, *Cultivating Genius*. As equity work is central to our program and college’s mission and vision, learning about Muhammad’s equity framework for culturally and historically-responsive literacy was strongly aligned with our teacher education goals and program learning outcomes. And while the imperative of equity advancement has been at the forefront of our work for many years, the urgency to support our preservice teachers by cultivating Black excellence through a historical lens has become increasingly central to our mission.

Our teacher education program faculty guide and support students, 34% of whom are Black, in their journey to becoming family daycare providers, paraprofessionals, teachers’ assistants. Upon transfer to partner 4-year colleges,

many of our students become head teachers in early childhood through 12th grade classroom settings. Our program strives to diversify the teaching workforce in New York State through practices that reflect a shift in the status quo of teacher preparation, in which policies and norms are in dire need of urgent pedagogies (Muhammad, 2020) that balance the science of learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020) with “liberatory practices deeply rooted in the assets, skills and knowledge that the learner brings to the educational context” (Herrera, 2022). Muhammad advocates for pedagogies that mirror those of Black literary communities and, as such, those that explicitly address identities, skills, intellect, and criticality. She inspires teachers to ask the following pivotal questions aligned with the HRL framework:

How will my instruction help students to learn something about themselves and/or about others? How will my instruction build students’ skills for the content area? How will my instruction build students’ knowledge and mental power? How will my instruction engage students’ thinking about power and equity and the disruption of oppression? (p. 58).

By asking these questions and considering how our teacher education program addresses identities, skills, intellect, and criticality, we are positioned to better understand where we stand in terms of advancing or prohibiting Black liberatory practices for our students.

We have divided this reflective essay into four sections, each one aligning with a layer of the framework. It is our hope and intent that by taking this time to reflect on our teacher education program, we will recognize ways to improve, while simultaneously sharing pragmatic ways to advance Black liberatory practices with other practitioners.

Identity

Our initial book club discussion reminded us of the strong work that we’ve been engaging in for many years, as well as the work that still needs to be done. Muhammad theorizes that in order to support Black and Brown students’ success, teacher preparation programs should be grounded in Black and cultural learning theories. One faculty member brought up the Educational Theorists research paper that is assigned in our introductory Social Foundations of Education course. We realized that of all the theorists that we offered as research choices, only a small handful were Black. We committed to centralizing Black educational theorists in our study, including outstanding female scholars such as Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McCloud Bethune, and Nannie Helen Burroughs (McCluskey, A.T., 2017; Muhammad et al., 2020). A culturally-responsive curriculum should

empower students to understand the realities of others through metaphorical windows, as well as see their own reality reflected back at them through mirrors (Style, 2014). Engaging students in culturally-relevant materials and fostering personal connections can give them perspective, engage their interests, and support them in interpreting meaning, thus catalyzing deeper levels of intellectual understanding (Hammond, 2014). By studying the learning theories of Black scholars, we enable our students to see themselves in the collective genius of their past while challenging them to read and reflect upon highly intellectual, stimulating scholarship.

As our book club discussions progressed, we continued to analyze representation, striving towards positioning students to identify more closely with course content. This brought us to also consider identity more broadly. Getting to know students' multiple identities is at the core of historically-responsive pedagogy (Muhammad, 2020). A deep understanding of how students' identities intersect and have historically shaped their learning practices can enable teachers to 'honor their psyche' (p. 69) and teach the whole child. In our Social Foundations of Education course, we invited students to consider their manifold identities following Hays' (2016) ADDRESSING framework. Using this framework, we introduced terms for various cultural influences, including age, disability, religion, ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, indigenous heritage, national origin, and gender, and discussed dominant and marginalized groups for each cultural influence (Farrelly, et al., 2021). Students then completed a written Culture Sketch (Hays, 2016) to explore the various cultural influences in their own lives that shaped their identities and resulted in their expectations, attitudes, and beliefs about themselves and others. Asking students who they are and how they view their own intersecting and multidimensional identities is a powerful Black liberatory practice, as people of color often have had their stories told for them throughout history (Muhammad, 2020).

The practice of exploring students' identities goes a step further for preservice teachers in our capstone fieldwork course. We begin the course by having student teachers craft developmentally-appropriate identity surveys to administer to the children in their K-5 field classrooms. This is based on the belief that children 'are seeking to find curriculum and instructional practices that honor the multiple aspects of who they are' (Muhammad, 2020, p. 69). The preservice teachers carefully crafted open-ended survey questions that encouraged the children to share their cultures, languages, likes, dislikes, joys, fears, interests, and goals. They also included a short introduction about themselves and their own identities. After curiously poring over survey results in groups during our fieldwork seminar, our students were now equipped with useful data and empowered with a purpose (ie. objective) for their lesson plan assignment. It is a

powerful practice for student teachers to create a tool that will have a direct impact on understanding who they are teaching and how to teach them in a way that is engaging and connected to their lived experiences.

We are taking steps to focus on identity not only within our courses but to foster a broader culture of historically-responsive pedagogy within the community. The Education Club, an on-campus, student-run organization for preservice teachers who are seeking additional support and engagement in service, is partnering with the college's Student Government Organization (SGO) to organize an evening for all interested students and faculty to explore identity. The two organizations will host an experienced artist who will facilitate a hands-on workshop with the goal of advancing exploration of professional self via portraits and other forms of artistic expression. Historically, representation in photography and film has been biased against Black subjects, as lighter skin has always been the baseline to calibrate 'normal' tones (Lewis, 2016). As the creation of public images can limit and enlarge our idea of who matters in American society (Lewis, 2016), this event will showcase Black women being represented as educators in our community, and Black skin properly and knowledgeably lit.

Skills

Authentic writing experiences geared toward actual audiences and driven by meaningful purposes is critical in helping Black students to recognize the value of their voice in shaping their learning processes (Delpit, 1988; Johnson & Sullivan, 2020). Delpit (1988) defines literacy skills instruction as "helping students gain a useful knowledge of the conventions of print while engaging in real and useful communicative activities" (p. 295). Historically, Black literary society members advanced their literacy skills through peer critique and revision across multiple genres (Muhammad, 2020). However, too often in classrooms, literacy skills work is associated with worksheets and rote activities, and the skills curriculum is not designed by Black teachers nor with Black children in mind. Throughout our program, we give students the opportunity to engage in writing that is meaningful by incorporating choice. In our Social Foundations of Education course, we assign an advocacy paper that asks students to delve into a social topic that relates to teaching and learning. There is one major requirement - *their* focus must be *their* passion. Students start by building a deeper understanding of their passions through investigating topics using various historical, political, philosophical, and socio-cultural lenses. Next, they proceed to research ways to personally engage with the issue and outline how they commit to advocate for the cause. Finally, they reflect on their experience. The variety of topics selected thus far - inclusion, social-emotional learning, bilingual programs, creativity in the classrooms -

provide for well-rounded, holistic classroom discussions that allow the group to recognize the complexity of the education system and the diverse beauty of our community. The advocacy work is authentic, real-world oriented, and purposeful. The writing that accompanies the process is a conduit to learning, organization, action, and empowerment.

It is our plan to have students reflect on this assignment and the course in general through questions inspired by Muhammad's HRL framework. At the end of the semester, in lieu of a final exam, students will consider the following questions in writing - What did you learn about yourself in this course? What did you learn about your community? Which meaningful skills did you practice? What knowledge have you gained? What have you learned about power, equity, and the disruption of oppression? What would you have liked to learn that we have not delved into? Engaging in such reflection is extremely valuable on multiple levels - an enriching experience for students and a telling assessment for instructors. Writing practices such as these, in which students are able to draw connections between learning in and out of school, while reflecting upon oppressive instructional practices associated with traditional schooling, have the potential to empower Black students to more deeply understand themselves as intellectuals and writers (Johnson & Sullivan, 2020). Reflecting on experience leads to learning as it provides the learner an opportunity to solidify connection between experience and meaning derived from it (Denton, 2011). This assignment also gives students space to evaluate the course utilizing holistic criteria that truly matter. Traditional final exams often emphasize skills and knowledge, as do traditional course evaluations. In addition, course evaluations are often teacher-centered, inquiring about content and the instructor, what he or she did or did not do, somewhat sidelining student experience. This assessment puts learners at the center, seeking their perspectives not only regarding skills and knowledge but also going beyond that, incorporating reflection about identity and criticality, ultimately providing a holistic understanding of learning and insight into progress in advancing Black liberatory practices.

As mentioned, peer critique and revision was an important practice among Black literary societies with the aim of fostering literacy skills (Muhammad, 2020). In the Social Foundations of Education course, students are given multiple opportunities to share their iterative written work and final projects with peers with the aim of fostering collective and lifelong learning. For example, students are asked to write a Statement of Teaching Philosophy, which tells a story of how they teach, what informs their pedagogy and why they utilize specific approaches and practices. As part of the writing process, students are asked to work in pairs or small groups to share their drafts and offer peer feedback. Doing so is reminiscent of Black literary societies which perceived literacy not only as obtaining individual skills to read and write, but also as a collective practice,

which aimed to empower all involved by galvanizing participants of different ages and abilities in literacy together (Muhammad, 2020). The act of offering peer feedback on drafts serves as a literary pursuit. In this case it also connects identity learning goals as students shape their professional identity through the written word.

Another opportunity to foster collective learning and pivot away from grading practices that reinforce traditional power dynamics whereby the instructor holds all of the power is peer feedback and peer assessment for group projects. Students are asked to work in groups to do multimodal presentations on important historical educational figures (which will intentionally center Black scholars and educational activists, as described previously). Instead of the instructor being the sole grader of the project, students provide feedback after each presentation using a ‘warm’ and ‘cool’ protocol. Specifically, each student is asked to describe one thing that they wish to congratulate or celebrate about the student’s presentation. Once every student has had an opportunity to offer feedback, the audience is then asked to describe an opportunity for improvement. In doing so, not only does it foster active listening and ensure all voices in the room are heard because they are all valuable, it also offers an opportunity for students to discuss and assess what aspects of student presentations are delivered in a professional way and where might there be opportunities for improvement so that the entire community can learn and improve upon their presentation capacities. The collective feedback process ensures that the presentation is not just for a school assignment, but that there is an actual audience of peers, driven by a meaningful purpose for how to improve upon public speaking, which is a valuable skill for educators. Similar to Black literary societies the process is collaborative and fosters sharing ‘knowledge gained from acts of literacy rather than keep[ing] education to one’s self’ (Muhammad, 2020, p. 26).

Intellect

In Black literary communities, reading, writing and speaking were studied not solely for the sake of demonstrating one’s skills and abilities. Black literary society members practiced literacy skills to ‘experience joy in literature and give them a platform to project their voices to public audiences’ (Muhammad, 2020, p. 57). That is, the literacy skills were a vehicle to apply their learning to authentic and interconnected concepts in the real world. This complex and nuanced multidimensionality of literacy is a far cry from the reading purposes seen in P-12 schools today. Endless preparation for biased, high-stakes exams can drain the joy out of literary practices and leave Black students marginalized. A narrow view of literacy, based predominantly on reading and writing skills such as fluency and

mechanics, is often the scapegoat for deficit labels such as *at-risk* and *struggling reader* (Friesen & Presiado, 2022; Jensen et al., 2021).

In teacher preparation programs, faculty play an important role in cultivating an intellectual literary culture by promoting language diversity in both formal and informal literacy practices. Last spring, some of our program faculty members participated in an interest group centered around dismantling classroom-based linguistic racism, which refers to ‘beliefs, actions, structures, and processes that perpetuate white supremacy’ (Hudley, 2022, p. 4). We discussed the importance of creating safe spaces for Black language and the dangers of silencing voices through seemingly innocuous practices such as incessant grammar correction and a hyperfocus on written mechanics. As linguistic marginalization is commonly connected to other forms of educational oppression (Jensen et al., 2021; Rosa, 2019), urging speakers to monitor and modify their language through code-switching can send the message that their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are not valued (Baker-Bell, 2019; Delpit, 1997). We discussed the fact that there is no correct or standard form of language, and that African American English follows grammatical rules and patterns. To correct one’s native dialect is to declare that their family, culture and community are also speaking incorrectly, which can have a direct negative impact on one’s feelings toward the school system and education in general.

Some years back, we worked with a Black female student in our fieldwork course who lit up the room when she taught. For her formal lesson observation, she chose to read *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987) to her third grade class, and the children were practically eating out of her hand as she danced around the room, inflecting her voice and gesturing throughout the story. We wished we could have recorded her performance to demonstrate her techniques for the other students in the class. The following semester, one of us was pulled aside by her current instructor and asked why she earned an A in our class. Her mechanical skills made her writing somewhat difficult to understand, and we knew that. We had recommended that she visit the campus Writing Center and given her some writing pointers, but did not lower her grade because of it. Our rationale was that we had other students who had strong grammatical skills but did not have the teaching presence and performance techniques that this student possessed, yet we did not lower their grade for it. We held true to our belief that these students were new to teaching and that our job was to scaffold their development through substantive mentoring and feedback, not to gatekeep by holding a biased vision of a good student. Our response to her instructor, despite being taken aback, was, ‘Watch her teach and you’ll understand why she earned her grade.’ She approached us a few weeks later in full agreement of our grading choice.

Muhammad's (2020) suggested approaches for cultivating intellect have led us to think more deeply about fieldwork placements for our preservice teachers. In order for students to see themselves as intellectuals, she recommends that teacher educators consider whether the learning environment of model classrooms are representative of and responsive to students' cultures, conducive to criticality, and intellectually rigorous. We realized that this is not always the case, as fieldwork placements have been harder to secure post-pandemic. However, we have reaffirmed our commitment to the highest standards for teaching practicum and have enlisted the support of a field site coordinator to ensure that our chosen school sites are ones in which intellectualism is consistently nurtured.

Criticality

Muhammad describes criticality as a way to understand and explain inequities and a practice that 'enables us to question both the world and the texts within it to better understand the truth in history, power, and equity' (p. 117). With criticality, students and teachers are positioned to work towards social justice within the classroom and beyond. One way to build criticality is through interrogation of the media, as it gives insight into documents that historically have and continue to shape public opinion, contributing to marginalization of certain groups. At our book club meetings, faculty discussed ways to implement this practice into coursework in a relevant way. One faculty member mentioned that in her Social Studies Methods class, she asks students to study the same current event through various sources, noting how differently the event is described and portrayed by various authors. As differences are outlined, potential reasons for them are discussed. Another faculty member suggested how important it is to take this practice and intentionally align it with the identity aspect of the HRL framework. As more than half of our college's students were born outside the United States, representing 142 different countries and 73 different native languages, incorporating international media sources that parallel the backgrounds of students can support their development of criticality around multiple perspectives on global issues.

The discussion about current events and analysis of sources naturally led to a conversation about book banning. Data from Meehan and Friedman's (2023) PEN America report indicates that between July 1, 2021 and July 30, 2022, bans occurred in 138 school districts in 32 states, representing over 5,000 schools and affecting nearly 4 million students. Of the banned texts, 40% had protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color and 21% titles of issues with race and racism (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). In an effort to build criticality and advance Black liberatory practices, it is pressing for our students to understand that this is

happening, why, and what they can do to dismantle this form of oppression. In an effort to build this understanding, faculty committed to bringing banned books into individual classes, and began to share ideas about holding a campus-wide banned book event.

In light of today's technological society, our program recognizes the importance of digital literacy, especially for students of color who statistically have less access to computing and digital literacy education across the United States (Kapor Center, 2021). According to Trust et. al (2022), 'teacher licensure programs should feature critical media literacy activities in every required course.' Criticality framed within HRL offers exciting insights and opportunities to foster critical digital literacies for our preservice teachers. We define critical digital literacy as the capacity to critically examine how power within digital contexts shapes knowledge, identities, social relations and the ways in which digital social processes reproduce the privileging of some and the marginalization of others. In the Social Foundations of Education course, students are guided through a series of activities referred to as Digital Critical Literacy Strength Training for Superheroes, developed with support from the Computing-Integrated Teacher Education (CITE) initiative led by the City University of New York and the NYC Department of Education. The sessions aim to encourage students to understand how search engines work, how they impact access to information and how the algorithms reinforce racist beliefs (Noble, 2018). They also encourage students to critically analyze the digital information they consume. Specifically, through a series of activities that include multimodal sources ranging from mainstream news to children's books to photos and videos housed on various social media outlets, students are encouraged to research the authors of materials and to examine whose voice is included and excluded in information and why it matters. They also analyze the narratives that are being told, and how digital images intersect with race and power. As highlighted by Muhammad (2020), students need to be encouraged to move beyond facts and examine the narratives that are being told - questioning whose perspectives and from whose lived experiences these narratives are derived from. The aim is to encourage students to name digital narratives that reproduce inequities in order to respond to injustices through the production of plugged and unplugged literacy.

Conclusion

This reflective essay provides several key take-aways concerning our community college program's commitment to Black liberatory practices. It is important to recognize that our idea to write this article emerged from the faculty book club, where we studied Muhammad's (2020) framework and doing so allowed us to begin a meaningful analysis of identity, skills, intellect, and criticality within our

work as community college faculty. Dedicating time for faculty to partake in such informal conversation about recent research proved to be a great starting point to foster HRL-centered curricula and programming.

It is apparent that we incorporate Black liberatory practices within our classes and program through specific assignments (e.g. multiple identities paper, identity surveys, advocacy paper, and course reflections), community events (e.g. art workshops that focus on identity, banned book events, and digital literacy workshops), and faculty development opportunities (e.g. conversations about language diversity). It is also apparent that there is room for improvement. In conducting our analysis, we recognized the need to centralize Black educational theorists that our students can identify with into our coursework.

We conducted this reflective analysis on a macro-level, providing concrete examples of engagement in work that focuses on tenets of identity, skill, intellect, and criticality. While this provides concrete ideas for educators to advance Black liberatory practices in various ways, this type of analysis is not a complete representation of our program and, therefore, an important but simple starting point for us. We are in the process of equitizing several courses as we work on strengthening transfer agreements with senior colleges. We view this process of curriculum development as an opportunity to continue analyzing not only our program as a whole but each part of it according to this framework. It is in engaging with every bit of the program with intention, and via micro-analysis of each course, assignment, policy, that we will position ourselves to build a space that truly cultivates genius.

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