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Searching for Authentic Cultural Engagement in the Classroom

Abstract

Many teachers in the current public education system in the United States do not fully consider the unique societal and cultural aspects of African American and Latinx learners. As a result, many teachers could benefit from developing skills that strengthen their understanding of authentic engagement, cultural competency, and cultural congruency to aid in implementing culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogical practices that benefit the diverse learning styles of these students. Additionally, some African American/Black teachers have adopted a standalone Eurocentric approach to teaching that could further alienate and disenfranchise students of Color. To address these issues, I describe and explain the decisions and actions taken by an all-African American teaching staff at a school in North Carolina that educates a 100 percent minority student population. This autoethnographic study also highlights the cultural and academic challenges that many students face due to the shortage of teachers who understand and apply methods and approaches involving cultural competency, cultural congruency and authentic cultural engagement.

Keywords

Cultural congruency, cultural competency, authentic engagement, cultural relevancy, Black asset-based pedagogy, White gaze, anti-Blackness

Children learn more from what you are than what you teach. ~W. E. B. Dubois
Education is indoctrination if you're white - subjugation if you're black. ~James Baldwin

Introduction

Growing up, I connected deeply with Black and Latinx music, language, and culture. I came from a religious and musical family that understood the value of providing a musical education for their children. My parents wanted my sister and me to learn piano in order to be well-rounded children, but they also wanted us to develop the skillset needed to play in our home church. My parents had strong beliefs about the sanctity of music. They were careful only to expose us to Gospel music, believing that other types of music were "the devil's music." Despite this, I would sneak and listen to Rap, Jazz, Blues, and Salsa when they were not around. The captivating sounds of these music genres not only sparked my passion for music but also cultivated my appreciation for the rich and diverse cultures of the African diaspora and Latinx communities.

Growing up as an African American child in Prince Edward County Virginia, I witnessed the devastating effects of racism in a small town. In response to the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, court ruling, local politicians in Prince Edward County, Virginia chose to close schools rather than integrate. I was profoundly saddened, angered and distressed by my parents' accounts of how the school closures, racial discrimination, and segregation they faced during the Civil Rights Movement of the '50s and '60s affected their lives. Their experiences, combined with my own encounters with marginalization, inequity, anti-Blackness, and school curricula that lacked cultural representation, have shaped my beliefs on inclusion, representation, cultural congruency, and cultural competency in the classroom.

Most of my educational experiences lacked an Afrocentric and Latinx-centered curriculum. My first encounter with a curriculum focused on African culture and Latinx culture and their individual histories was under the direction of an African American music teacher at my high school. She was proud of her heritage, her "Blackness," and her graduation from an HBCU. She showed us that band music was more than music from White composers and that we Black and Latinx students needed to know about our music, history, and culture. This encounter opened the door to diverse musical styles and forms, instantly connecting me to my African heritage and love of Latinx culture. Later, however, as an undergraduate music student, I was taught by White professors who had no substantive training in cultural congruence, cultural competency, and culturally relevant teaching techniques, as well as by Black teachers who taught from the same Eurocentric framework as the White teachers and that precluded a deeper understanding of my heritage, culture, and how my people help to shape the world (Miller & Harris, 2018). This lack of multicultural inclusion and the Color-blind, Eurocentric one-approach-fits-all model practiced by many public-school systems in this country distanced me from my culture, my heritage, and my connection to the Black Diaspora (Eizadirad & Campbell, 2021).

In undergraduate school, my core music, general education, and teacher training classes did not include content on culturally relevancy, congruency, or competency teaching practices, nor did they include approaches geared toward teaching the increasingly diverse student populations found in the United States (U.S.) education system. More than twenty years have passed since then, yet education continues to fall behind in approaches that empower and improve the academic outcomes for Black and Latinx students (Valencia, 2015).

Current 21st century teaching practices in the public U.S. education system lack a pedagogy that fully encompasses the societal and culturally rich components of the lives of African American and Latinx learners (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019). Even teachers who have had some training in this regard may need additional cultural competency and knowledge in order to adequately apply culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally sustaining (Paris & Alin, 2014) pedagogical practices and approaches that respond to the unique learning styles of African American and Latinx student populations.

As an experienced educator, my goal is to create inclusive spaces that promote positive narratives of academic success for diverse learners. In pursuit of that goal, I am especially interested in positions at schools that not only serve but also embrace Black and Brown students and staff. During one school year, I had the opportunity to join school in North Carolina with an all-Black administration and teaching staff, a 100 percent minority student population, and a mission closely aligned with my dedication to diversity and inclusion. What I experienced, however, was a lack of commitment to curricular diversity, cultural congruency, and cultural competency by the teachers and administrators. Instead, I witnessed teaching approaches based on Eurocentric pedagogies, a total disregard for the majority Spanish-speaking student population, and overall mediocracy in classroom instruction and engagement.

My own educational experiences coupled with my background as a music teacher to mostly Black and Latinx urban youth propelled me to consider how Eurocentric teaching approaches and Color-blind ideologies have caused a disconnect between the schooling and home lives of the children of Color I teach and how Black teachers can unknowingly harm Black and Brown students academically and emotionally because of a lack of authentic congruent teaching practices.

In this autoethnographic study, I explore four issues: what circumstances prompted the pedagogical decisions and actions taken by the all-African American teaching staff; how the pervasiveness of the White gaze, double consciousness and expectations of Western teaching practices effected Black teachers willingness to be authentic in the classroom; the cultural and academic impacts those decisions and actions had on many students; and effective teaching approaches and ways of engagement that I used. Through these narratives and a discussion of the relevant literature, this study will show how authentic cultural engagement, cultural congruency, and cultural competency helped address the unique needs and learning styles of the students at that school.

To promote clear and consistent terminology throughout this autoethnography, I propose a practical definition for the terms African American, African diaspora, Black, and White. When referring to ethnicity, the terms African American and African diaspora will be utilized, while Black and White will be used to denote race. Additionally, I use culturally responsive teaching and its related terminologies (relevancy, sustaining) interchangeably to explore pedagogical practices that align students to their ethnicity and culture.

Research Questions

Coupled with my passion for music teacher education, education writ large, and equitable teaching practices for students of Color and students with ethnically diverse backgrounds. As a result, the following questions came from my profound desire to make sense of the unconscious anti-Black teaching strategies, lack of culturally congruent and culturally competent pedagogical practices, and unauthentic cultural engagement that I witnessed at a school in North Carolina. I

also wanted to understand the ways that this anti-Blackness and lack of cultural congruence operate to disenfranchise and academically harm the schooling and societal experiences of Black and Latinx youth.

1. How did Eurocentric pedagogy and teaching practices promote anti-Blackness in the classroom at this charter school?
   (a) What role did double consciousness and the White gaze effect Black teachers pedagogical practice?
2. How could culturally congruent teaching practices improve academic outcomes for minority students at this charter school?
3. How can I use my Blackness and commitment to Latinx culture as tools to combat anti-Blackness and anti-Latinx practices at this charter school for the academic liberation and success of my students?

Methods

The autoethnographic method is a deeply personal approach that requires vulnerability from the writer in sharing personal stories and experiences. Storytelling can be a powerful medium for disseminating experiences and the narratives of research candidates. Poulous (2021) stated that

> "autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues (p. 4).

Through my writing, I hope to vividly convey my experiences while working at this school and offer a glimpse into the social factors and cultural phenomena that can impact education outcomes for students of Color. By crafting engaging narratives that illustrate my interactions with students, teaching staff, and administration, I have identified recurring themes that support my beliefs about inauthentic teaching engagement and challenges faced by students of color in accessing fair and equitable education.

I utilized the autoethnographic method to share my experiences at a school in North Carolina where 100% of the students and staff were African American and Latinx. This North Carolina school serves a predominantly minority student population. The school has a mission of academic excellence and making college possible for students of Color while promoting diversity. However, despite their mission emphasizing improvement in the social and academic lives of their students and an equity-based education model that celebrates diversity, they are failing to implement these words in their actual practices. The educational practices, curriculum and teaching model in use are antithetical to their mission and perpetuate anti-Blackness. I believe they employ a deficit-based pedagogical model that is contrary to antiracist equitable practices.

Through my study, I delve into the experiences of Black teachers who are compassionate, knowledgeable, and committed to their profession, and explore how they navigate the challenges of teaching Black students within an educational system that relies solely on Western pedagogical methods. I also investigate the ways in which the need to balance a dual consciousness and the expectations of conforming to the norms of educational whiteness and the

white gaze can have a detrimental impact on these teachers' ability to teach authentically. Furthermore, I examine how these pressures can hinder Black teachers from utilizing culturally congruent and competent pedagogical skills that could benefit their Black students. Through this exploration, I provide detailed narratives illustrating how cultural congruency, cultural competency, and authentic cultural engagement affected my teaching. I have also reviewed literature to show how such practices can either positively or negatively impact the academic achievement of students from diverse backgrounds.

Usage of Cultural Competency and Black Teacher Declaration

Cultural competence is a complex and dynamic set of skills that is constantly evolving and expanding. It is built on increased knowledge and skill development related to its attributes (Burchum, 2002, p. 5). The concept of cultural competence has traditionally been associated with White teachers who need to develop these skills in order to understand and engage with ethnically and culturally diverse students (Burchum, 2002). Cultural competence is also seen as a bridge to building and fostering authentic relationships, trust, and understanding between teachers and students. It describes a teacher's ability to connect with their students by understanding their cultures and backgrounds and appreciating cultural diversity.

In this article, I use cultural competency and congruency and authentic engagement to form a unified concept and set of suggested skills that could help teachers become more culturally aware, responsive, and in tune with the unique needs of students of Color. Although I focus on cultural competency in this article, I also aim to stress the importance of developing and using a Black asset-based/pedagogical framework set of skills that can inform White teachers on how to connect and understand their Black students and other students of Color. This set of skills can give White teachers a better understanding of their students' cultural heritage, experiences, and needs, which can help them become more effective in teaching and engaging with their students of Color. Moreover, this framework empowers Black teachers to authentically engage with their students using their cultural connectedness, responsiveness, congruency, and competency in every aspect of their teaching. By leveraging their cultural heritage, Black teachers can provide a safe and supportive learning environment that fosters students' academic and personal growth. Additionally, I focus on Black teachers who have, in many cases, by birthright and societal experience, a keen understanding and innate relationship to cultural competency, congruency and authentic cultural engagement but, due to external factors, may not always use this skillset in their pedagogical practices and engagement.

Although it is often assumed that Black teachers are already culturally competent due to their connection to the atrocities and legacy of slavery and their personal experiences of anti-Blackness and marginalization, including in the U.S. education system (Amos, 2011). Some scholars believe these adverse experiences automatically make Black teachers adapt at understanding the complexities of race, racism, inequality, and marginalization (Amos, 2011; Vakil et. al, 2016). However, many Black teachers may be reluctant to show up as their authentic selves in the classroom due to the prevalence and pervasiveness of the White gaze and the duality or what W.E.B. Dubois called double consciousness that Black people experience. These factors cause many Black teachers to follow Western teaching practices and Eurocentric-focused curriculums and pedagogical approaches, often without even realizing that they could place their culture and cultural competency at the forefront of how they engage with their Black students.

Despite this, Black teachers have historically been the backbone of schooling for Black students, and they continue to be champions for their success and excellence in the classroom (King, 2006). I have yet to meet a Black teacher who was not invested in positive academic outcomes for their Black students. The teachers described in this article are culturally competent at their core. They have a keen understanding of their students' cultures and backgrounds, and they appreciate cultural diversity and congruency. They are faithful, committed, and diligent in their pursuit of the educational success of their students, and they are strong support systems for Black excellence in the classroom. Still, the restraints imposed by traditional Western curriculums and pedagogical approaches prevalent in the U.S. education system along with the ever-looming White gaze force many Black teachers to unwittingly practice educational Whiteness.

Cultural Congruency and Culturally Competency: Frameworks for Success

Students of Color in the U.S. education system suffer from a significant gap in achievement due to practices that are anti-Black and anti-Latinx (Corral, 2020). Both Black and White teachers often lack the necessary skills and mindset to truly engage with students of Color and to challenge Eurocentric ways of thinking and knowing (Duchesneau, 2020). Some theorists have argued that teachers lack cultural sensitivity and the training needed to create culturally affirming environments that promote academic success (Howard, 2002). In this study, I utilize cultural congruency (Hines & Atherton, 2015) and cultural competency (Rice, 2007) to understand the obstacles, challenges, and struggles many students of Color, primarily African American and Latinx, face in pursuing an equitable, just education. Combined, these frameworks are best suited to address anti-Blackness, inequality, injustice, Color-blind educational practices, and the lack of culturally rich educational practices that many students of Color face in the U.S. educational system. Although these frameworks are typically used to address the lack of knowledge and experience many White teachers have in engaging with and teaching students of Color, specifically Black and Latinx students, I use these frameworks to also understand the disconnect many Black and Latinx students encounter when Black and Latinx teachers use only Eurocentric pedagogical approaches in the classroom.

Students of Color often experience a significant contrast between their experiences in school and their home life and cultural background (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). This discrepancy can be effectively analyzed using the cultural congruence framework that comprises culture, pedagogical practices, academic performance, and social context of instruction. It is a pedagogical approach that can be used by educators and researchers to examine the mismatch many students of Color face between their home and schooling cultures (Au & Kawakami, 1994). Au and Kawakami (1994) stated that educational practices informed by cultural congruency, “features of students’ home cultures, but do not result in activities and environments identical to those of the home” (p. 6). The authors further explained that an educator’s framework and pedagogical approach can create an atmosphere where students learn at their maximum potential because the educational approaches are organized similarly to the values and norms in their homes and communities.

Another critical approach to building and fostering relationships and academic success among students of Color is understanding and practicing cultural competency. Cultural competency refers to the ability to navigate and understand cultural differences in order to effectively achieve objectives (Rath et al., 2021) and is a set of tools and teaching strategies that

educators can use to treat people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds with respect and empathy. The goal is to honor and affirm their students' families, communities, and overall identities (Lopez et al., 2017). Lindsey (2009) posited that cultural competency and equitable schooling require that "[teachers'] personal values and behaviors and the school's policies and practices [be] aligned in a manner that is inclusive with cultures that are new or different" (p. 14). The core of the practice is inclusive engagement and removing Color-blind educational practices (Mahiri, 2017). Antithetical to the Color-blind educational approach, cultural competence reinforces the othering of students of Color while reinforcing historical and current social and economic inequity (Chun & Evans, 2016).

Vignette 1

At the end of the 2022 school year, I accepted a position as a band teacher at a nearby school after leaving an elementary school where I had successfully served for eight years. This new job particularly appealed to me because, for the first time, I would work with a teaching staff and student body comprised entirely of people of Color, with 64 percent Latinx students and 36 percent Black students. I had previous experience working in Title 1 schools, so I understood how poverty and marginalization could negatively impact students' educational experiences and how racism and anti-Blackness continue to be problematic in most U.S. urban schools. Moreover, I discovered that students attending urban schools were often set up for academic failure in part due to a lack of funding resources and teachers who had low expectations for them.

During summer professional development sessions, district trainers emphasized the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in the classroom. They conducted training workshops for all staff to ensure that every student would feel accepted, validated, and included by their teachers. The facilitators delved into equity, fairness, social justice, inclusion, race and racism, pronouncing students' names correctly, poverty, and many other topics targeted towards the betterment of marginalized students. I was surprised that the session leaders taught extensively about anti-Blackness and teaching practices in the urban setting because, as I looked around the Zoom call boxes, most participants were teachers and administrators of Color. I had a resounding question in mind: "Why talk about anti-Blackness in this setting?"

At the time, I had assumed that teachers of Color teaching students of Color would not need extensive training on race-related equitable teaching practices and anti-Blackness in the classroom. Despite my questions about the need for such emphasis, the training gave me a sense of pride, knowing that I would work for a school system that took so much effort and time to introduce and delve into topics that addressed the social and academic challenges that students from low-income and marginalized communities often face, especially given the historical foundations of anti-Blackness and Anti-Latinx in U.S. schools.

Anti-Blackness and Anti-Latinx in the Urban Education System

Anti-Blackness is a varied intellectual tradition and term that originated from leaders in the Black community (Hartman, 1997). Anti-Blackness is a concept that refers to the deep-rooted structural racism and institutionalized oppression that systematically marginalizes Black individuals. This can encompass a range of injustices, such as physical violence, systemic discrimination, dehumanizing policies, targeted police brutality, segregation in communities,

mass incarceration, and the pervasive devaluation of Black lives across various societal domains (Bledsoe, 2020; Gilmore et al., 2021). Anti-Blackness is not solely a U.S. phenomenon but can be found around the globe (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019). This global phenomenon has its origins in the transatlantic slave trade of the 1500s (Kendi, 2016) and has continued to plague Black people in the US from then to modern times (Tometi, 2020). Hamann and Harklau (2010) explored the struggles that Latinx students face in their pursuit of schooling in the U.S. and posited that institutionalized racism contributes to academic failures. Anti-Blackness, anti-Latinx, and other pervasive practices that cause a disconnect between a student's culture, background, and humanity have been the foundation of the US education system (Coles, 2019). Students of Color have historically encountered obstacles, hurdles, rejection, denial, and inequity in their attempt to receive a fair, just education (Portes, 2005; Vaught, 2011). Urban schools perpetuate anti-Blackness, racism, and inequity, resulting in academic harm (Coles, 2019).

Most school in the U.S. have never been race-neutral; they have often been institutions steeped in systemic racism, anti-Blackness, culturally biased practices, and pedagogical practices that harm many students of Color (Spencer & Ullucci, 2022). The urban school system is unique because it typically serves racially and ethnically marginalized students of Color living in a densely populated city often plagued by poverty and racial segregation (Welsh & Swain, 2020). Coles (2020) stated that "Spatially, urban education is influenced by the ways urban residents are zoned (read excluded) along lines of race and poverty" (p. 183). The conditions of poverty, racial segregation and anti-Blackness are thought by some scholars to have contributed to an urban education system that is designed to fail and undermine the education of many students of Color (Marcucci & Elmesky, 2022). According to Tyack (1974), urban schools did not create the injustices found in US education system but played a significant role in perpetuating those injustices.

Urban education reform researchers have posited that urban schools negatively affect Black children (King et al., 2013). Urban schools, where Black and Latinx students are the majority, are still taught predominantly by White females (Byran, 2017). Some theorists have asserted that a lack of Black and Latinx teaching staff could further harm students of Color due to the possibility of teacher biases, lack of culturally responsive training, exclusive Eurocentric teaching practices, and an unwillingness to engage within the community of the students they serve (Sleeter, 1993). To create more equitable futures for urban education, researchers have proposed new directions that prioritize the voices of urban youth while emphasizing educational policies aimed at closing opportunity gaps (Coles, 2022). It is crucial for White and Black teachers to directly address the socio-structural regime of anti-Blackness that permeates the context of urban schools, both in their research and practice (Coles, 2022; Gilmore & Bettis, 2021).

Vignette 2

For the first few weeks of school, I did not teach music. Instead, I was assigned to assist in the general education classrooms to allow students time to become acquainted with and acclimated to the schedule and school cultural expectations. I assisted 6th, 7th, and 8th grade teachers in classroom and behavioral management. After a few days, it became clear that this would not be the school experience I had anticipated. Most students were angry, on the defense, and sometimes even in what I would describe as survival mode. These behaviors presented themselves through a complete collective refusal to participate in classroom activities, constant challenges and rebellion to classroom authority, disrespect of teachers, disruptions through peer

arguments along with cursing matches, physical fights, and breaking glass door panels. These behaviors were what I viewed as a total disconnect from standard school culture and expectations.

Despite this newfound realization of what I might face in my classroom, I was hopeful that my music class might be a place where students could be creative, inspired, and fulfilled. As I prepared, I knew that my approach would have to be different from how I had taught before in order to get my students' attention. On the first day of class, I was ready with ice breakers, classroom expectations, examples of the current, relatable music with which we would be engaging throughout the year, and other "fun" activities. Despite my best efforts, these preplanned approaches and activities were unsuccessful; in fact, the first few classes were disasters. The students did not seem interested in music. They were combative and disrespectful and collectively shifted the environment to one that pitted them against me. Even the most standard task of assigning seats led to an uprising; students refused to sit in their assigned seats, and many became verbally abusive when I insisted that they do as they were instructed.

It became painfully apparent that this would be a challenging year and that I needed to develop a plan to connect with my students if I wanted them to be successful. I was faced with the challenge of overcoming my students' aversion to education and creating a positive learning environment. To achieve this, I made it my mission to build strong and meaningful relationships with each of my students with the aim of inspiring and motivating them to actively participate in class. Through this approach, I hoped to establish a bridge of trust and understanding that could remove academic resistance and foster student success.

Encountering Student Academic Resistance and Creating a Bridge

Urban students of Color from low-income communities often struggle with poverty and come from families with negative experiences with schooling, leading to resistance and trust issues with teachers (Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Fine, 1993; Smyth, 2006). Ennis & McCauley (2002) asserted that building trust between urban secondary school teachers and students is crucial for an effective learning environment and student success, and this involves time-tested relationship building. Teachers can develop relationship-building and trust through intentional and genuine engagements, including learning and respecting students' backgrounds and cultures (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2009; Payne et al., 2023). This is what I refer to as authentic cultural engagement.

Theorists and educators have posited the need for teachers willing to respond to students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds to foster meaningful and genuine relationships (Pianta et al., 2012). Pianta et al. (2012) asserted that the quality of teacher-student relationships is fundamental to student engagement. In the same vein, Hayes (2003) stated that a teacher's first responsibility is to create an environment where every child can learn, grow, and prosper. To make greater strives toward student success, teachers could use diverse approaches such as culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies to connect to their ethnically and culturally diverse student populations (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Paris, 2012).

Currently, Black and Latinx students encounter comparable difficulties when seeking a just, equitable, and impartial education. In urban school environments, these students are frequently educated by teachers who have not been trained adequately in practices that validate their culture, language, and ethnicity (Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Some theorists argue that the

negative effects of the absence of culturally validating and suitable pedagogical techniques are made worse when the instructors themselves are Black (Arday et al., 2021). Theorists and researchers have asserted that Black and Latinx teachers are uniquely qualified to understand the learning styles, cultural differences, and needs of Black and Latinx students. Their teaching styles often consider cultural differences in how authority is perceived, how instruction is delivered, how teachers perform, and the use of culturally familiar language and events (Gardner et al., 2020). However, as a result of much of their training, school pedagogical expectations, and assimilation to Eurocentric culture and teaching practices, some Black and Latinx teachers have steered away from culturally affirming strategies that bring cultural adhesion to diverse student populations and which could help to create tremendous academic success (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012; Jackson, 2015).

Vignette 3

After coming to terms with my role and situation at my new school, I was still hopeful that systemic change was possible. The principal and leadership team had a solid knowledge base on culturally responsive teaching and a dedication to uplifting students of Color. We had staff meetings every day on ways to improve our students' behavior and academic performance. However, there appeared to be a disconnect between praxis and practice. Despite all our meetings and the summer professional development sessions, there seemed to be very little understanding of how to apply the methodology of culturally responsive and culturally congruent teaching practices to classroom instruction. In essence, the administration talked about the concepts but did not apply them to curriculum choices or instruct teachers on how to apply these approaches. Classroom instruction and engagement continued to be from a Eurocentric approach with little emphasis on African/African American and Latinx cultures, histories, and traditions. Latinx students, who made up most of the school population, received less support in the classroom because there were no classroom Spanish speaking teachers. For students who did not speak English or had a weak command there could have been feelings of exclusion from the educational process. This language barrier, coupled with the cultural disconnect some students expressed with me, left some students feeling marginalized or excluded. Several Latinx students even reported what they believed were discriminatory treatment by these teachers, including being singled out for speaking Spanish in class and being treated differently from their Black peers. The concerns expressed by the Latinx students were addressed with the teachers in question, a counselor, and the assistant principal, which revealed that the teachers were trying to encourage the students to practice English speaking in class, and they assured the students that there was no cultural favoritism at play. I believe a lack of cultural competency and congruency could have led to the misinterpretation of intentions and treatment felt by some of the Latinx students.

Although the students were angry, distrustful, and leery of classroom engagement, I believed they could still succeed. I wanted there to be a success story and I know the other teachers did as well. What connections were we missing between our pedagogy and engagement with the students? I kept thinking about why we as teachers of Color to students of Color were not having a more significant impact on their students. The teachers were uniquely positioned to engage students with their curricular expertise and connection to the African diaspora, the Black community, and innate understanding of the Black societal dynamic. There was no need for what W.E.B. DuBois called double consciousness in this setting; everyone was a person of Color. Was there a social and cultural disconnect because the students came from low-income families?

Were the teachers so removed from their communities and Blackness as a result of their assimilation of Eurocentric culture and education practices that they could no longer relate to the plight of their Black and Latinx students or develop favorable social structures within the school? Or was there a deeper and more profound issue that hindered these strong well intentioned Black teachers from being their authentic selves in the classroom? The prevalence and pervasiveness of the White gaze, as well as the duality that Black people experience, may have caused this reluctance.

After I conducted additional observations of my colleagues' teaching approaches, some of my questions were answered. During these observations, I noticed, for example, that some teachers of English language arts often gave White authors a superior status while giving authors of Color, especially Black and Latinx writers, little recognition. In one ELA class, a teacher made a statement that I found troubling: "If you want to experience real writing, you need to read Shakespeare." This statement missed an opportunity to uplift authors of Color and empower the students, especially since the class was entirely made up of students of Color. In another instance, while helping with behavioral issues in a history class, I was surprised at how little emphasis was placed on the contributions of African Americans to the history of the United States. I thought that their contributions would be a central part of the lecture, especially when discussing the country's origins. As I observed this and various other similar incidents, I began to ponder the prevalence of such pedagogical practices among the teachers in my school and I became deeply concerned about whether our all-black teaching staff was equipped to provide adequate education to our minority students. Moreover, I was deeply concerned about whether our all-black teaching staff was equipped to provide adequate education to our minority students. Could it be that our all-black teaching staff was, in fact, failing our minority students?

When Minority Educators Fail Minority Students

Schools in the U.S. often function within a cultural system that emphasizes Eurocentric values and practices, which can lead to the marginalization of communities of Color and their unique ways of knowing (Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, teachers of Color often face challenges in terms of their ability to fully engage with their students, grow professionally, and serve as advocates for their communities. Kambutu et al. (2009) asserted that teachers of Color, particularly those who are Black or Latinx, often identify instances of racism and classism within a larger sociopolitical framework. The authors suggested that these teachers frequently oppose such inequities but may face conflicts due to their Eurocentric training and methods that might be at odds with culturally appropriate, supportive, and affirming practices.

There is a common belief that only White teachers are responsible for the academic struggles of Black and Latinx students in the U.S. education system (Miller & Harris, 2018). However, some experts argue that teachers of Color have also contributed to this issue by establishing learning environments that prioritize Eurocentric history, culture, and teaching methods, while neglecting the history, language, culture, and dialects of students of Color (Irizarry, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Asante (1990) suggested that although Eurocentric culture is ubiquitous in the U.S., its pedagogical practices should not be perpetuated as singular in the educational practices for students of Color.

As early as Reconstruction, some Black teachers focused on preparing formerly enslaved people to assimilate into the White world, and their pedagogical practice had little to no

reference to Black freedom and curricula that affirmed their students' culture, history, or Blackness (Du Bois, 2017). Conversely, Butchart (2007) asserted that White teachers from the North made up a third of the teaching staff of Southern Black schools during Reconstruction and that they upheld deficit educational narratives of Black students while promoting the notion that both Black literacy and illiteracy were moral transgressions. During this time, Black communities pushed for Black teachers, often believing that they would do more to preserve culture and would better understand the needs of Black students (Love, 2019). However, not all Black teachers have worked toward an emancipatory educational praxis; some Southern Black teachers actually preserved the racial order of Black inferiority and did little to bring cultural cohesion and congruence to their educational pedagogy (Woyshner & Bohan, 2012). Woyshner and Bohan, argue that a lack of cultural alignment, competency, and relevance in practice constitutes anti-Blackness.

In the third vignette, I aim to vividly depict the deep-seated concerns that my Latinx students have shared with me regarding their sense of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization in the context of their schooling experience. From my assessment, I do not believe that the school or teachers purposefully harbored a culture or attitude of discrimination towards Black and Latinx students or deliberately practiced anti-Blackness in their teaching methods. Conversely, I know they had their student's best interest in mind and strived to make every student feel supported and included.

Despite this, the school's heavy reliance on the Eurocentric model of teaching approaches, and practices that didn't align or take into account the unique learning styles of the predominantly Latinx student body, coupled with the lack of training given to the teachers on engaging English language learners and cultural differences in the classroom resulted in an environment that the students could perceive as discriminatory. Furthermore, I acknowledge that the well-intentioned teachers were doing their best to maneuver through adverse classroom environments that were challenging, frustrating, and often demeaning due to excessive behavioral issues and the lack of administrative support. Despite knowing that racism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Latin were not systemic issues at the school, I still felt compelled to discuss the opinions of these students and reveal their lived realities. To change the narratives, perceptions, and feelings of marginalization of students in the classroom, the North Carolina school could have adopted a different pedagogical approach. This could have included altering the curricular content to be more inclusive and providing training to teachers on how to work with students whose first language is Spanish.

Vignette 4

The positive connection that students of Color can have to teachers of Color is immeasurable. I attended Longwood University, a predominately White institution of higher education in my hometown. Longwood had a small Black population of around 80 students. During my time there, I seldom had a Black or Latinx teacher; however, on the rare occasions when I did, I felt an enormous sense of relief, security, and validation that was not present when I academically engaged with White teachers. I believe all my college professors had good intentions and did their best to create an environment where everyone felt equal and affirmed; however, there were certain voids they could not fill. I needed the familiarity, cultural connectedness, and understanding that could only come from teachers of Color during my very impressionable undergraduate years, especially in an almost 100 percent White music

department where everything was presented from a Eurocentric perspective. To be submerged in this setting was to be constantly reminded of my otherness, cultural differences, and alienation from my culture.

As an educator, I believe that teachers of Color are essential to the academic success of students of Color. These teachers must understand their power and responsibility and take that charge seriously through their teaching style, curricular choices, relationships, and affirming practices. I have seen my students' looks of happiness, security, and confidence when they have me as their teacher. They say, "This is so cool; we have a Black teacher." Latinx students of all ages show that spark of excitement and sense of "knowing" when they see that they have a same-race teacher who speaks Spanish and affirms and celebrates their culture. I have had students who would not follow the directions of their White teachers and who were experiencing academic failure in those classes follow the expectations of my classroom, authentically communicate with me, and excel. To my surprise, most of these students did not excel because they enjoyed music; on the contrary, they were not big music lovers but felt a sense of security, connectedness, and cultural congruency that they did not get from the pedagogical practices in some of their other classes.

My focus in the classroom shifted from musical theory, history, and performance practice to the lives and lived experience of my students. I created "Getting to Know You" questionnaires to learn about their interests, hobbies, goals, music, sports, and things they did with their families. I used this information as a catalyst for conversation-building. As the students saw that I remembered things about them and knew about Black and Latinx cultures, they were willing to have meaningful conversations beyond my musical agenda. Additionally, I used their information to help formulate my lesson plans and curricular choices. My goal was to bring both their and my culture, heritage, and musical interests into the classroom while still teaching the concepts I knew were essential for a sound musical education. I was putting into practice the concepts and approaches I had learned around culturally responsive and sustaining teaching.

Arguments and fights, although still present in the school, had decreased in my class. During instruction, students had shifted from angry, disruptive, and combative to reluctantly active participants. I use the phrase reluctantly active participants because very few students were fully engaged and participating; however, there were signs of interest and willingness. One day, a Latinx student who was a natural and respected leader among the other Latinx boys decided he was interested in the keyboard. He had no keyboard skills but decided he would be the class accompanist. Rather than forcing him to get off the keyboard, I tried to use this to my advantage. I gave him a motif and rhythm to play and gave the rest of the class a short rap to accompany him. It worked. He felt heard, validated, and empowered, and the rest of the class enjoyed the experience. More importantly, I had gained a classroom ally.

I also allowed time in the classroom for group discussions around topics that negatively affect communities of Color. We discussed racism, poverty, education, police brutality, the school-to-prison pipeline, gentrification, equity, liberation, apartheid, indigenous rights, and other topics that interested them, including the disconnect they felt with their teachers, how some of their teachers were not "Black" enough, and how little they were learning. My students were genuinely interested in these topics and would debate each other respectfully and constructively. Through the musical examples I presented, they started to see how music, culture, and liberation could work together. I once again was using cultural competency, cultural responsiveness, and cultural congruency in the classroom, and the students were seeing themselves in the lessons and how important their culture and heritage were to me and to everyone in the classroom. We were

building community in the classroom through my ability to put my Blackness and love for Latinx culture before Eurocentric educational practices.

As I continued to develop deeper relationships and showed consistency and dedication to my students, I began seeing even more improvements in student behavior and participation. Students who, at the beginning of the year, had said, "Mr. Lyle, you know I am not going to play that instrument," were now putting forth effort and showing interest. Students were asking to take instruments home to practice and even apologized for previous episodes of confrontational behavior. As time went on, I was able to put together a choir for Black History Month that was accompanied by 15 members of the wind ensemble. There was growing buzz about music in my school. Students started bringing instruments from home and asking to play in my room during their lunch periods.

I had successfully begun to bring about systemic change to the culture and environment in my classroom. I knew that the changes I saw in my students were because I was using genuine engagement and practices that included cultural congruency, cultural competency, and culturally affirming practices in the classroom. I let my Blackness and love of Latinx culture become central components in my teaching to affirm each student's culture, language, and background. These practices led to behavioral improvements and academic wins that were not realized and manifested in other classes where teachers held firm to their Eurocentric teaching practices. I attribute my students' willingness to engage in classroom activities and their behavioral improvements to the cultural richness of my lessons and my congruent teaching practices.

Congruency at Work in The Classroom

John Dewey, a pioneering figure in psychology and curriculum theory, believed that the curriculum should be relevant to students' lives (Dewey, 1895; Lagemann, 1989). As early as the 1900s, he advocated learning environments that fostered positive connections with students' unique experiences and needs. Dewey understood that an irrelevant and ethnocentric education would be undemocratic and ultimately fail students (Thornton & Flinders, 2013; Vavrus, 2008). The idea of congruency and cultural connectedness toward the betterment of academic success for students of Color is a concept and practice that continues through multicultural education practices (Banks, 1993), cultural responsiveness and relevancy (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Gay, 2002) and sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2014) and other asset-based educational practices.

While a culturally rich curriculum and environment are important, they alone cannot address the disconnect that many students of Color experience in the U.S. education system (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). Representation in the form of teachers of Color is a vital component for improving academic outcomes for students of Color (Howard, 2019). Ehrenberg and Brewer (1995) found that Black students perform better with Black teachers. In their study of secondary school student outcomes, the authors concluded that test scores improved for Black students when they had Black teachers. Part of the connection between Black students and Black teachers deals with ethnic identity and cultural connections.

During adolescence, a student's ethnic identity and self-value are shaped (McKinzie, 2002). Phinney (1989) suggested that the development of ethnic culture is a crucial aspect of adolescent development, while Erikson emphasized that the formation of a child's identity is a significant psychosocial task during this period. In Vignette 4, I presented my account of how Black students reacted to me being a Black teacher who practiced cultural congruency and of the

positive academic outcomes that can be accomplished when students have a teacher who is both shares their ethnicity and practices cultural congruency. Likewise, the cultural competency of a teacher is essential to creating a culturally rich classroom environment (Pang et al., 2011). The teacher in the Pang et al. story emphasized the importance of Black teachers being able to connect with Black and Latinx students, but this connection can happen only if the teachers move beyond Eurocentric teaching practices and become cultural partners and advocates for their students. It is vital for students to sense and experience cultural connection and respect and to know that their teachers genuinely care about them and their situations.

Discussion and Implications

Through these stories, it was discovered that I not only aimed to transform educational opportunities for students of Color but also expressed a deep relational commitment to teaching as part of communities of Color. Wilson (2008) argued that teachers of Color who are oriented in their communities bring a culturally authentic ontology, epistemology, and axiology into their teaching practices. When teachers of Color have authentic relationships with their students that are based on cultural congruency and competency, they support efforts to honor and uplift the student's community by fostering student success. Agyeman and Erickson (2012) stated that "The bridge between evidence and culturally competent practice is a bridge that planning educators need to build urgently" (p. 264). My experience while teaching at a North Carolina school was instructive. First, even though I was at a school aiming to improve the academic outcomes of Black and Latinx students, I witnessed how having an all-Black teaching staff with knowledge of asset-based pedagogies, equity, inclusion, and fairness was not enough to achieve the stated goal. The teachers lacked substantial and thorough coaching and administrative guidance, making it difficult for them to implement the concepts and theories.

Second, I saw how crucial it is for students of Color, especially Black and Latinx students, to have teachers of Color who can serve as positive cultural figures who can stand up authentically in their Blackness and Brownness. Such teachers can positively impact their students by using liberatory education practices such as culturally responsive, culturally sustaining and congruency that counter indoctrination. However, the current U.S. schooling model is based on Eurocentric ways of understanding and knowing that often prevent teachers of Color from being authentic in their approach. Similarly, because of their own Eurocentric educations and other cultural factors, teachers of Color may not be able to impart knowledge to students of Color in a manner that reflects their shared ontologies.

At a school where everyone is a person of Color, the classroom experience should differ from what is typically seen in traditional U.S. academic settings. As proposed by Phillips (2011), teachers of Color should have the freedom to put their culture and heritage at the forefront of their teaching praxis. They should have the freedom to incorporate their culture and heritage into their teaching methods. Black and Latinx teachers who want to be more impactful with their students should be able to get the coaching and support they need to successfully practice cultural congruency and competency in the classroom. White teachers may not understand the challenges that teachers of Color face in this regard, but in an education system steeped in and dominated by Eurocentric practices, it can be difficult for teachers of Color to engage their students fully and authentically.

Although further inquiry into how teachers of Color can practice cultural congruency, cultural competency, and authentic engagement in the classroom is still needed, Black scholars and scholars at large who have a passion for Black student success, educational justice, and antiracist teaching practices are focusing on Black pedagogical approaches that remove the sole reliance on Eurocentric teaching practices and epistemologies and antiblack educational practices. One example of scholarship that focuses on transforming standard Western teaching practices that align with and centers Blackness as an asset can be found in the work of Paris and Alim (2014). They asserted that Black educators and students should not ascribed to the fallacy of comparing and measuring ourselves solely to the education standards of Whiteness. The authors are focusing their work on "enacting pedagogies that are not filtered through a lens of contempt and pity (e.g., the "achievement gap") but, rather, are centered on contending in complex ways with the rich and innovative linguistic, literate, and cultural practices of Indigenous American, African American, Latina/o, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and other youth and communities of Color" (p.86).

Similarly, Asante (1988) argued that a culturally specific framework such as Afrocentricity would best serve students of Color. The scholar defined Afrocentricity as a way of understanding and viewing society and the world at large through African people's experiences, perspectives, and points of view (Asante, 1991). In the same vein, Gay (2000) asserted that culturally inclusive instruction in teacher education coursework could empower teachers to understand and apply cultural knowledge and skills to develop lesson plans and approaches that reconnect Black students to their culture and heritage which would lead to positive academic outcomes. Bond (2017) is another author who has centered their research in framing Blackness as an asset. The author emphasized the importance of placing cultural capital and competency in the K-12 classroom and in teacher training. The author stated that "in recognizing each student's cultural and social capital, one is able to validate students' backgrounds and empower them to promote their experiences as a resource" (p. 155).

Studies have shown that cultural competency, congruency, and authentic engagement in the classroom are beneficial for Black students and other culturally diverse student populations. Despite this, the U.S. education system still lacks positive heritage practices, cultural validation, acceptance, and cultural competency. However, there is a growing body of scholarship that challenges the deficit approaches for Black students and other students of Color. The White gaze that pervades society and the U.S. education system, along with the unspoken expectation of White educational uniformity for Black and Brown teachers and students, continue to systematically harm and diminish Black excellence. Despite these continued pervasive educational practices, developing and acquiring skills embedded in cultural competency, congruency, and authentic engagement could improve the academic and social connectedness of Black, Latinx, and other children of Color.

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