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BOOK REVIEW

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Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy.
Gholdy Muhammad
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As Black educators with a collective twenty-plus years as teachers in K-12 spaces, we appreciate the need to develop Black educators and to center the voices of Black students into the epistemological framework on educating Black students. Further, as current teacher educators, we recognize the need to provide preservice teachers with space to shape ideologies that support and conspicuously embrace Black students. We also seek to provide teacher educators with space and opportunities to develop their agency with interrogating and disrupting anti-Black policies and practices that have plagued schools since their inception, particularly in the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* era. As proud Black educators, we constantly interrogate elements of the existing

curriculum and sometimes recoil at the paucity of inclusivity regarding Black voices, classroom practices that feature the historical richness of Black people, and a healthy respect for the oral tradition of Black people. These glaring omissions are compounded by the seemingly ubiquitous White gaze that often permeates educational quarters, both K-12 and higher education sectors. Further, as Bettina Love asserts, many Black students are "spirit murdered" in classroom spaces, meaning there is widespread "denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism" (p. 2) resulting in a diminution of Black children.

That said, *Cultivating Genius*, by Gholdy Muhammad, represents an incredible encapsulation of historical accuracy and prescriptive content to effectuate a conceptual shift in the way we educate. One of the ostensible purposes of contemporary education is to imbue students with skills, both academic and social, to support students in ultimately securing gainful employment. With this purpose in mind, many schools across the globe strenuously usher students toward the acquisition skills, often to the exclusion of the development of powerful cultural inclusions. In Part One of *Cultivating Genius*, Muhammad rationalizes the importance of accessing the historical genius of Black people and neatly defines the concept of genius. "Genius is the brilliance, intellect, ability, cleverness, and artistry that have been flowing through their minds and spirits across the generations" (p.12). She also makes the strident assertion that imagination exalted and encouraged in early grades but is appreciably diminished in middle and high school spaces.

Championing literacy as a human right, Muhammad harkens back to the era of American slavery and invokes literacy techniques used among enslaved people to educate themselves. The resultant literacy societies, she argues, provided collaborative teaching and learning spaces for enslaved people to carve out their own spaces out of necessity, as Whites would not allow them to participate in White-dominated literary organizations. In fact, as Muhammad states, enslaved people often viewed education as a vehicle for freedom and self-identity. "As part of a broader struggle to counter multiple attacks of oppression with violence, they used their minds and pens as weapons to battle injustice. Books and other forms of texts became ammunition to fuel their progress" (p. 8).

Reaching back and adducing the techniques used in yesteryear, Muhammad developed a universal teaching and learning model called Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL). This equity-based framework includes the following dimensions:

1. **Identity development** (who they were)
2. **Skill development** (developing proficiency in content)
3. **Intellectual development** (gaining new knowledge/concepts about the world)
4. **Criticality** (ability to read texts to understand power, authority, and anti-oppression)

With the pervasive oppression and injurious "colorblind" sentiment present within curriculum around the country, this framework affords educators a tool for considerable academic disruption. Muhammad also cogently speaks about the need to create spaces where students can "name and critique injustice to help them ultimately develop the agency to build a better world" (p.12). She

continues, “As long as oppression is present in the world, young people need pedagogy that nurtures criticality” (p.12).

Cultivating Genius challenges educators to develop their own genius to eventually develop the genius in their students. “To teach geniuses, however, charges teachers to cultivate their own genius that lies within them” (p.14).

In Part Two, Muhammad further fleshes out the layers of the HRL Framework. Fundamentally, she refers to each domain within the framework as “pursuits.” Of the four pursuits named in the HRL Framework, the identification of the pursuit of identity and the pursuit of criticality stood out as profound additions to the current pedagogical practices widely seen in classrooms. In many ways these pursuits serve as bookends, creating a new start and end point, for our pedagogical practices. Inspired by the historic Black literary societies, Muhammad makes a strong argument to support that these inclusions, along with a refinement of the pursuit of skills and pursuit of intellect, serve to affirm and empower Black children in meaningful ways.

With respect to the pursuit of identity, Muhammad tellingly states, “Identity is fluid, multilayered, and relational, and is also shaped by the social and cultural environment as well as by literacy practices” (p. 67). Muhammad contends that identity and learning goals are inextricably linked and must be developed concurrently. Further, she argues that “Teachers cannot get to skills or content- learning standard until students see and know themselves in the curriculum designed for them” (p. 78).

The notion that identity is multidimensional provides a compelling rationale for crafting a comprehensive curriculum that develops students’ collective sense of themselves. Muhammad also asserts that the existing curriculum is often Eurocentric in orientation and is not created with students’ identities at the core of planning. With the overwhelming preponderance of public school educators in this country identifying as White women, the Eurocentric purview likely abounds in educational spaces, much to the detriment of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC).

To combat this and other pernicious practices, Muhammad suggests problematizing the vantage points that view students through deficit lenses and challenges educators to meaningfully ground themselves in what it means to be Black in contemporary society. Intentionally centering Black voices, experiences, and ways of being can potentially disrupt what Wynter-Hoyte and Swindler Boutte (2021) refer to as *symbolic violence* perpetrated against Black students in educational spaces. Symbolic violence refers to non-physical violence perpetrated against students and is evidenced through the negative stereotyping of people of color.

Muhammad also includes in her framework the *pursuits of skills* and *intellect* as essential learning for students. Because the acquisition of skills and intellect hold a prominent presence in school spaces, the emphasis here is the endpoint, the ultimate goal being criticality, which encompasses those attributes. Criticality is the culmination of the three previous pursuits; the layered work in three previous pursuits is a necessary catalyst for the pursuit of criticality.

With the *pursuit of criticality*, Muhammad seeks to enhance students’ ability to critique the world around them en route to transforming it. Often due to how the curriculum is designed and how some educators teach, students in K12 spaces need considerable support in transferring school

learning to real-world contexts. When students develop criticality, Muhammad maintains, they become equipped with the needed skills to combat enormity, racial microaggressions, and general injustice (p.119). Concomitantly, skills and new learning must be enacted in ways that transform. Muhammad urges educators to promote an action orientation of acquired learnings and she encourages educators to develop their own sense of criticality to assist students in fostering theirs (p.113).

In Part Three, Muhammad begins by defining texts as "anything that can be read- both print texts and non-print texts." While we would explicitly add thinking and speech to that definition, Muhammad states that Black people were reading the texts, but they were also reading the world; they also read the social times and images as text, as the social milieu was/is exceedingly dangerous for early Black readers. To accurately interpret all forms of text required considerable discernment and skill, rendering the early Black readers deft and nimble, contrary to conventional beliefs about enslaved Black people.

Muhammad also posits that selecting historically responsive texts is critical for the success and cultural nurturing of Black students, as the vast majority of children's literature does not represent imagery of Black people nor center their voices. She cites a study conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison that found the vast majority of the texts children read depict White characters or animals; approximately 21 percent represent Black, American Indian, or Latinx populations. Further, Muhammad argues that texts are typically selected to cultivate skills only, missing rich opportunities to enliven discussions and purposefully connect students with content.

Muhammad offers several questions for consideration when selecting texts, such as *what is worthwhile for learning in my content area*? and *how will this text advance my students' learning of skills?* According to Muhammad, the answers to these and other critical questions brings educators closer to making responsible decisions in classrooms; texts should contribute to the meaningful development of identity, skills, intellect, and criticality. Among the several techniques Muhammad suggests for achieving success in the classroom is layering texts. Muhammad argues that when educators layer texts, they employ various texts, print and nonprint, to support the learning goals.

Cultivating Genius is a very timely and desperately needed text. Inspired by the historic Black literary societies, Muhammad creates a strong argument for culturally and historically responsive pedagogy as a means to restore equity in the classroom and empower Black students. While Muhammad specifically names Black students as the target population and inspiration for this work, there is an unspoken element to the cultural disconnect that we find in schools. The cultural disconnect that we often speak of as an educational community is discussed in terms of the diverse cultural backgrounds of our students, but rarely mentioned is the lack of diversity in the cultural backgrounds of educators. It's not *just* that we are working with increasingly diverse populations of students, but also that the culturally diverse backgrounds of our students often directly contrast with the White Eurocentric cultural background of educators and the educational institution at large. In not naming both sides of this cultural disconnect, we neglect an important

and fundamental aspect of this relationship. While Muhammad calls for educators to be self-reflective before asking students to engage in this reflective work, we craved more attention to what educators, and specifically White educators, need to self-explore to be successful in their implementation of HRL with students.

As Muhammad moves from theory to practice, the text declines in strength. The strong attention to detail and lucid explanation that is present in the first half of the book is missing in the latter. We specifically sought more attention and time to grapple with the implementation of this pedagogical practice. While lesson plans are provided in Part Three, we found them to be simplistic and better situated earlier in the text. Integrating the lesson plans earlier in the text alongside the dissection of the four pursuits of HRL would have created a stronger connection and opportunity for further analysis. While experienced teachers may be better equipped to integrate this historical responsive framework into their culturally sustaining pedagogical practices, there is a desire for some of these connections to be made more explicit for our novice teachers.

Overall, we need to make space for this framework in our teacher education programs and classrooms. While at times we craved more attention and detail to the implementation of this framework, *Cultivating Genius* creates a foundation for us as an educational community to build upon. We hope to see more work that uses the HRL framework as a springboard to further discuss the intricacies and results of engaging in this practice.

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