Putting Muhammad's Framework of Historically Responsive Literacy to Work in Middle Grades Language Arts

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Abstract

Now more than ever, it is imperative that middle grades literacy curriculum invites "students to learn about matters of personal, social, moral, and ethical significance" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 27). Using a framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy, Muhammad advocates in her groundbreaking text, Cultivating Genius (2019), for curriculum that provides middle grades students space to learn about matters of significance, to name and critique injustice and oppressive structures, and to develop their agency to cultivate a better world. In this essay, the authors discuss the possibilities and challenges that we – one a former interrelated resource teacher currently enrolled in a PhD program, the other a current 8th grade Language Arts teacher – experienced while collaborating to design an 8th grade literacy unit using Muhammad's equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy. This article will begin with an overview of Muhammad's four-pronged framework—identity, skills, intellect, and criticality—followed by a discussion of how this informed our curricular decision-making, particularly around the inclusion of fiction texts that center the voices and perspectives of queer, trans, and Black and Brown folx. Though readers of this story will be disappointed to find no happy ending to our earnest endeavors, we aim to provide a case study in what Freire (1970) called "problem-posing" education, wherein students are empowered to critically analyze the world around them in ways that challenge the hegemony of a dominator culture that aims at every turn to silence their voices.

Introduction

Classrooms need not be sites of disempowerment. Instead, no matter how challenging, they are places of possibility because teachers and students can make them anew each day. It may appear that those in higher-up positions decide everything, a top-down view of power that is designed to disempower those lower in the pecking order and thus ensure the smooth reproduction of existing structures (in this case, education). But those on top only govern with the consent of those beneath them. If teachers and students did not cooperate, the structures would be different (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 97, emphasis added).

In their pioneering 2021 white paper for the Association of Middle Level Educators (AMLE), *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*, Drs. Penny Bishop and Lisa Harrison outline the necessary characteristics of successful educators, schools, and curricula. They identify effective educators as individuals who respect and value young adolescents and their multiple and intersecting identities – race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, and religion, to name a few – as well as modeling an "inclusive, democratic, anti-oppressive, and team-oriented" (p. 12) approach to teaching and learning. Effective middle schools must be welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all, an effort that requires educators to "acknowledge that prejudices such as racism, xenophobia, ableism, religious intolerance, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and classism are present in schools" (p. 14). It is thus of paramount importance that educators are explicit in recognizing and naming bigotry where it exists, the authors argue, in addition to helping their students see where their actions may be discriminatory and reflective of prejudicial beliefs. Finally, they explain that curricular materials must be challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse in order to invite "students to learn about matters of personal, social, moral, and ethical significance" (p. 27). Teachers can do this by integrating students' concerns about social problems in their own communities into the curriculum, "invit[ing] students to pursue answers to questions they have about themselves, their communities, and the world" (p. 30). Diversity in the curriculum must also go beyond traditional multicultural efforts that focus on narrow, highly visible aspects of culture, like food and clothing.

Though there is nothing inherently wrong with these sorts of celebrations, the authors argue that, in and of themselves, such approaches are "insufficient because they still often center a Eurocentric curriculum where diversity is largely an add-on to largely unchanged curriculum" (p. 32). In order to provide an inclusive and antiracist school environment for their students, therefore, educators must be able to critically evaluate their curricular materials for what might be missing and/or misrepresented. Genuine diversity provides students with sustained and fully integrated opportunities for students to discuss "diverse perspectives, learn in diverse ways, and learn how diverse people have contributed to the world across all subject disciplines" (p. 32). Exposing students to diverse perspectives creates critical opportunities for students to examine and interrogate their own assumptions and biases, as well as allowing students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

What follows will build on Bishop and Harrison's (2021) model of effective middle grades teachers, schools, and curricula by connecting these theoretical principles for social justice to a framework that explains how to apply them in practice: a tool that we, the authors, have found in the four-tiered framework of historically responsive literacy (HRL) articulated by Gholdnescar Muhammad in her revolutionary 2019 book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*. In this article, we recount the story of two educators – one a former middle grades interrelated resource teacher currently enrolled in a PhD program, the other a current 8th grade Language Arts (ELA) teacher – and their efforts to leverage the framework in ways that afforded students space to learn about matters of significance, to name and critique injustice and oppressive structures, and to develop their agency to cultivate a better world. This article will begin with an overview of Muhammad's four-tiered HRL framework – identity, skills, intellect, and criticality – followed by a discussion of how this informed our curricular decision-making, particularly around the inclusion of fiction texts that center the voices and perspectives of queer, trans, and Black and Brown people. Though readers of this story will be disappointed to find no happy ending to our earnest endeavors, we aim to provide a case study in what Freire and Ramos (1970) called problem-posing education, wherein students are empowered to critically analyze the world around them in ways that challenge the hegemony of a dominator culture (hooks, 2003) that aims at every turn to silence their voices.

Overview of Muhammad's Framework

Thus, the invitation to a future of excellence and equity in Black education is not about pulling up a chair and seating ourselves at a table that the ancestors and Elders have already bought and paid for. It is about thoughtfully and carefully curating spaces where Black being *is* the table. (Dillard, 2021, p. 25)

We must begin by saying that the brevity of this paper could in no way do justice to Dr. Muhammad's brilliant work in *Cultivating Genius* (2019); therefore, we urge any and all readers who have the time and means to procure a copy of the text and read it yourselves. Muhammad's framework for HRL draws on the historical legacy of literacy in Black communities in the US as a roadmap for finding the genius in our students in contemporary school settings. She (re)defines literacy as a transformative act, "no longer just a set of skills to possess, but the instruments used to define their lives and the tools to advocate for their rights" (Muhammad, p. 9).

Muhammad (2019) argues that a productive starting point in curriculum design must be to design teaching and learning with students in mind who have been historically marginalized in schools; frameworks, like this one, that have been designed *for* children of color and written *by* people of color. Because marginalized communities have traditionally had their histories erased, omitted, and excluded from the curriculum (Dillard, 2021), diverse perspectives cannot simply be an addition to an overwhelmingly a-critical and Eurocentric curriculum. It is necessary to restructure and rethink curriculum from the ground up. Ladson-Billings (2021) calls this "content integration" (p. 70) – shallow, surface-level efforts to incorporate diverse topics into our teaching without actually interrupting mainstream hegemonic norms and practices. For instance, a teacher might have a picture of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. posted somewhere in their classroom but never give students space to question the underlying social inequities and injustices that he fought against. In stark contrast, "a culturally relevant teacher helps students challenge existing power

structures and begin to use culture to make meaning of the curriculum and their own experiences" (Ladson-Billings, p. 72). Otherwise stated by endarkened feminist researcher Dr. Cynthia Dillard, "If we are to imagine a future that is for Black culture, it requires that we build our own tables for our own education" (p. 22). Thus, the humanizing table that Muhammad provides in her HRL framework is a way for teachers to support students for whom the education system was not designed. It is also written for teacher educators who are preparing the next generation of preservice teachers to disrupt racism, sexism, and other intersecting oppressions in schools. Its four components – identity, skills, intellect, and criticality – contain concrete ways for teachers to reimagine what education could look like when centering students who have not traditionally seen themselves reflected in formal learning institutions. The following section outlines the contours of each of the four tiers of the framework in turn.

Identity

> This is the work of identity that Black freedom requires, (re)membering that allows us to feel all of the joy and all of the spirit of being Black. (Dillard, 2021, p. 24)

The HRL framework begins with the concept of identity as a way for marginalized communities to challenge deficit perspectives and harmful stereotypes, as well as providing students with critical opportunities to explore selfhood. According to Muhammad (2019), students "need space in K-12 classrooms to make sense of who they are and who they are not, because students of color are flooded with images and representations in media, literature, and social media that depict their identities in deficit ways" (pp. 67-68). If students are not provided a language for understanding their own identities, then it may fall to dominant deficit perspectives and harmful stereotypes to define who they are for them. Otherwise stated by Muhammad herself when reflecting on growing up both Black and Islamic, if students do not know themselves, "others will tell them who they are, in ways that may not be positive or accurate" (p. 70). This is particularly salient in an education system that was designed for a default body that is White, cisgender, heterosexual, English-speaking, and typically-abled (Davies et al., 2005). Any *body* that deviates from this norm will typically not find reflections of itself in the curriculum. Education that aims to get it right with historically marginalized communities must grant students spaces to "come to know who we are **as Black people** and not as we have been imagined by ourselves and others" (Dillard, 2021, p. 21 [emphasis in original].

Institutions, like schools in the US, steeped in the violent and exclusionary legacies of colonialism, slavery, and segregation, must allow historically marginalized communities' opportunities to define themselves in their full humanity, and on their own terms, otherwise "the false power of takers *requires* that we forget who we are and that their version of us *become* us" (Dillard, p. 21 [emphasis in original]. Therefore Muhammad's (2019) HRL framework begins by leveraging literacy education to help students explore their complex, shifting, and dynamic identities. In the HRL framework, teaching identity is intentionally antecedent to the teaching of skills because our goal in education should not be simply to help our students become better test takers, but also to help students "gain the confidence to use learning as a personal and sociopolitical tool to thrive in this world and to help them know themselves" (Muhammad, p. 68). Before teachers begin to focus on literacy skill development like decoding, fluency, or comprehension, "students must authentically see themselves in the learning" (p. 69).

In addition to making a theoretical claim for implementing historically responsive literacy practices in *Cultivating Genius* (2019), throughout the text Muhammad also provides several example activities that teachers can use to correspond to each of the four prongs of the HRL framework. For instance, in the Identity section she describes an activity called, "Who are you?" (p. 73). In this exercise, students pair up with a partner and go back and forth for one minute identifying different aspects of what defines them as a person. She writes that students typically run out of things to say relatively quickly, and that filling 60 seconds with different concepts that define them as people proves more difficult than they anticipate. Not only does this avenue for self-exploration open up a world of inquiry for students about themselves, but it also provides teachers an early and upbeat way to get to know students as they see themselves.

Skills

> Our Black students are not failing; it is the systems, instruction, and standards created to monitor, control, and measure a very narrow definition of achievement that are off the mark. (Muhammad, 2019, p. 87)

Muhammad (2019) defines skills as proficiencies outlined in state standards and evaluation frameworks, often measured using high-stakes standardized assessments. The operative question teachers must ask themselves when teaching skills is who has the privilege to determine which skills are necessary for students to master, and if they are doing so with children of color in mind. In her 2019 masterpiece, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, Dr. Bettina Love discusses the incredible profitability of labeling Black and Brown children as failing in schools. Under the guise of progressive reform, for-profit corporations have flooded the market in recent decades selling everything from standardized tests, prepackaged and scripted curricula, and character education programs that claim to be able to address the nation's urgent and growing "achievement gap." Dr. Love points out that just four major testing companies – Pearson, ETS, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and McGraw Hill – make $2 billion a year in revenue while spending $20 million annually on lobbying efforts. What these gimmicky quick fixes fail to mention is the barriers of racism, discrimination, poverty, and access to higher education that are systemic and institutionalized, and thus cannot be addressed by funneling ever increasing amounts of public monies to private, unelected, and unaccountable corporations. Love refers to this parasitic relationship as the "educational survival complex", wherein contemporary American schools are places "in which students are left learning merely to survive, learning how schools mimic the world they live in, thus making schools a training site for a life of exhaustion" (p. 27). In order for teachers to swim against the rising tides of the educational survival complex, pedagogies must…

> …call out and teach students how racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and inequality are structural, not people behaving poorly. They must criticize the systems that perpetuate injustice…while pushing for equitable communities, schools, and classrooms. (Love, p. 55)

Muhammad (2019) thus emphasizes that historically and culturally responsive teaching cannot focus on skills in isolation without concurrent attention to concepts like identity and criticality (both concepts to be explained in further detail in the next two sections). Otherwise, we risk obscuring the role that institutionalized inequity plays in schools, thereby allowing these oppressive systems to continue unchallenged.

One way to begin teaching skills is an exercise called "The urgency of your pen" (Muhammad, 2019, p. 91). In this practice, teachers call on students to think about their identities and communities in order to determine the social issues most urgently in need of change or improvement. Students create a list of important issues and from there can begin units on persuasive or argumentative writing from the starting point of social problems relevant to their own lived experiences.

Intellect

As the neoliberal turn in education has shifted to a narrow focus on teaching skills and preparing for standardized tests (Au, 2016), Muhammad (2019) argues that educators must awaken students' genius by nurturing an intellectual culture that helps them see *themselves* as intellectuals. Tests alone are insufficient, for "if teachers focus solely on students' results from one achievement test, they may begin to focus on what students can't do and miss the brilliance that the test may not have captured" (p. 112). In order to peak students' interests, Muhammad writes, we must rethink the texts we put in front of them, providing curricular materials that are sufficiently relevant to their lives that they are intellectually energized to engage them. We must adopt what Freire & Ramos (1970) called a "problem-posing" approach to education, inviting students to read literature that facilitates critical thought, and through which they can create avenues for thinking across their own histories and perspectives. This is in stark contrast to the banking model of education, easily recognizable in classrooms dominated by rote memorization of facts and figures. Students in this paradigm are treated as *banks* where teachers simply *deposit* learning without reciprocity or any opportunities to make/create/construct meaning of their own.

Evidence of rampant anti-intellectualism in schools, according to Muhammad (2019), includes prepackaged/scripted curricula, which stifles teacher autonomy and leads to teacher deprofessionalization (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020); overreliance on teaching skills; tracking of students; leveling of texts; and the lack of planning time for teachers. One way she proposes teaching intellect is through debate, a traditional format that, when facilitated effectively, allows students to analyze a topic through multiple lenses, perspectives, and positions.

Criticality

> The better the public's ability to analyze social issues, the better equipped they become to act as first-class citizens. Elite groups rule, in part, by suppressing dissent and not simply by arresting dissenters (as is done in some countries). They repress the critical thinking of women, poor people, African Americans, Latinos, native peoples, immigrant groups, and sexual minorities, creating situations where people live with ignorance instead of engaged, critical analysis. (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 10)

The final, and perhaps most important, prong in Muhammad's (2019) framework for HRL is that of criticality, which she defines as "the ability to read, write, and think in ways of understanding power, privilege, social justice, and oppression, particularly for populations who have been historically marginalized in the world" (p. 120). When teachers are narrowly focused on teaching skills and preparing for state assessments, it can be easy to push this type of critical engagement to the bottom of our pedagogical to-do lists. However, Muhammad argues, students need these lenses in order to see how equity and anti-oppression can operate in society by first being trained to see, name, and interrogate the world to make sense of injustice. Our teaching must answer the call for students and teachers to understand the ideologies and perspectives of marginalized people around the world such that we can find ways of collaboratively and collectively working towards social transformation.

In addition, Muhammad (2019) insists that students need criticality in order to dismantle deficit discourses surrounding their own identities in society. The ability to distinguish facts and truth, to read the world with a critical eye, is necessary for those who inhabit liminal spaces to protect themselves from harm. Muhammad warns that criticality is not something that can be done as a time-filler, or something fun to do at the end of the year; it must become an intellectual practice through which students are empowered to study the state of humanity, something that is weaved into the fabric of our classroom culture throughout the school year. For this reason, I will not expound upon any specific activities related to the explicit teaching of criticality, though Muhammad does articulate several in the text.

In the following section we describe how the authors – Kelsey and Matt, the former a current doctoral candidate and the latter a current 8th grade Language Arts teacher – brought Muhammad's (2019) framework into conversation with Bishop and Harrison's (2021) articulation of the characteristics of middle grades teachers, curriculum, and schools, in a partnership where we attempted to collaboratively design and implement a 10-day unit plan rooted in culturally and historically responsive literacies.

Context

When you think of young adolescents (aged 10 – 15), or adolescence itself, what are the first words that come to mind? Do you see dominant social narratives of adolescents as hormonal and irrational? Do you pity the poor middle grades teachers tasked with heralding students through the treacherous waters of young adolescence? Or do you see a vision of the genius in our young people that Muhammad (2019) so generously and patiently invites us to cultivate? These were the core inquiries driving a seminar entitled "Sociocultural issues of early adolescent/sce", designed and instructed by Dr. Hilary Hughes in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice (ETAP) at the University of Georgia. Kelsey took this class in spring 2021 as part of her required coursework for a doctoral specialization in Middle Grades Education. To inform this seminar, Dr. Hughes attempted to find scholarly literature that depicted adolescents from an asset-oriented perspective, highlighting their strengths and abilities, instead of conforming to dominant deficit perspectives of adolescence as a time of irrationality, wild

hormonal mood swings, and meaningful only insofar as it functions to prepare young people for the "real" world of adulthood. Because Dr. Hughes could not find the kind of theoretical framing she was searching for, she decided to instead populate the course with some of the best texts she could find that celebrated the brilliance of adolescents from diverse backgrounds – young adult fiction novels. Throughout the spring of 2021, we read several young adult novels that were written by queer, trans, and Black and Brown authors, all of which celebrated the beauty and brilliance of youth.

At this juncture, Kelsey (doctoral student) decided to reach out to Matt (Language Arts teacher), a former colleague from her time as a classroom teacher. Prior to Kelsey leaving the classroom to pursue full-time doctoral studies in 2019, we taught together at the same school for four years – working closely on the same 8th grade Language Arts collaborative planning team for two of those four years – in a large suburban school district outside a major southeastern city. After Kelsey pitched her ideas to Matt, we decided to bring the texts Kelsey encountered in this seminar into conversation with Muhammad's HRL framework (2019), as they invite exactly the sort of critical engagement articulated by Drs. Bishop and Harrison in *This We Believe* (2021). In addition, all of these texts centered the marginalized perspectives that Muhammad argues are so violently absent from the majority of English Language Arts (ELA) curricula. At the time of this writing, Matt was still teaching 8th grade ELA in the same county. As part of Kelsey's final project for the sociocultural issues seminar, we decided to collaborate to design a 2-week (10 day) unit plan incorporating excerpts from each of the following texts, in addition to activities from different sections of *Cultivating Genius* that Matt could then bring to his collaborative planning team and, hopefully, implement and teach in his own classroom.

Brief descriptions of the texts we used are contained in the next section. These are by no means an exhaustive list, though we hope they can at least provide a productive starting point for teachers who, like us, have little background to draw from in our own educational experiences when attempting to select texts representing a diverse array of perspectives for our students. We intentionally did not include the unit plan here for two reasons: the first is around potential copyright issues when reproducing the texts we intended to use beyond our classroom spaces; the second is that each community, classroom, and group of students is unique, and therefore we did not intend for the unit to be reproduced elsewhere.

Pet, by akwaeke emezi

Pet is an Afrofuturistic tale of a teenage girl named Jam who lives in the idyllic town of Lucille with her parents, Bitter and Aloe. Lucille is a utopian paradise; according to the town's official histories, all the monsters in Lucille have long since been defeated by its angels, or so the good citizens think. One day Jam is exploring Bitter's art studio, curiously observing her mother's newest painting, when she trips and accidentally cuts herself. The drops of blood that drip onto the canvas bring the creature of her mother's imagination to life, and it emerges from the painting pronouncing to Jam its terrifying purpose – to root out a monster still living here in Lucille.

To say this story is a page-turner is a gross underestimation of its captivating powers; readers will hardly want to put it down until the very end. For us as adult readers, this is the first time that we have ever encountered a novel featuring a Black trans protagonist. When reflecting on the dangerous erasure deceptively depicted as normal throughout our educational experiences, we found that the vast majority of literature taught to us as children centered the experiences of White, cisgender, heterosexual men, with few exceptions outside of Whiteness and Eurocentricity. *Pet* not only decenters Whiteness through the depiction of Black protagonists; it also decenters heteronormativity through featuring family structures that fall outside the conventional two-parent household with a cisgender mother and father. In addition, this novel provides students an opportunity to encounter *creators* in literature outside Eurocentrism and Whiteness and heteronormativity; its author, akwaeke emezi, is nonbinary and trans, and they were originally born in Nigeria.

The Poet X (2018), by Elizabeth Acevedo

The Poet X centers on the experiences of 15-year-old Xiomara, a teenage girl born to Dominican parents in modern-day Harlem. In this coming of age story, Xiomara finds herself and her voice through her poetry.

This novel is immediately striking for the way that it defies conventional narrative form; the story is written entirely in the form of short poems composed by Xiomara herself. What is weaved together is thus more than a story; it is a work of art that allows the reader to *feel* as the narrator feels, struggling as she does throughout the story with navigating the pains of first love, the religious conservatism of her mother, and a merciless comparison to her "perfect" twin brother, Xavier. Acevedo not only defies conventions of how fiction has traditionally been written, but whom our stories are traditionally told about. Xiomara is a young female protagonist of color whose story is told by Acevedo, herself a Dominican-American woman poet who grew up in New York City. In a sea of curricular materials exclusively featuring cisgender heteronormative (and mostly, long dead) European White men, *The Poet X* breaches the unstated boundaries of whose stories are deemed worth telling by the hidden curriculum in schools that rarely depicts people of color or women, except as plot devices intended to help the White male protagonist complete his character arc.

On the Come Up (2019), by Angie Thomas

This story is set in the fictional neighborhood of Garden Heights, the same setting as Angie Thomas's first breakaway hit novel *The Hate U Give* (2018). It features Bri, a 16-year-old aspiring rapper whose father was an underground rap legend, but died before he could hit big. She therefore has a tremendous legacy to aspire to, and dreams of making it out; dreams that become urgent as her mother loses her job and the family faces food insecurity and the threat of homelessness.

Bri's story in *On the Come Up* highlights the importance of the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) in honoring students' diverse and complex identities. Bri is young, Black, female, and poor – all perspectives traditionally under- or misrepresented in the curriculum – and none of which can, in isolation, tell the full story of her humanity. Black feminist scholar Dr. Bettina Love (2019) writes of intersectionality as central to creating a classroom culture where students, in all their infinite and messy complexity, actually *matter* to teachers. For, she explains, "Mattering cannot happen if identities are isolated and students cannot be their full selves" (p. 7). Otherwise stated by queer feminist scholar Dr. Sara Ahmed (2017), "I am not a lesbian one moment and a person of color the next and a feminist at another. I am all of these at every moment" (p. 230). Intersectionality thus provides a necessary analytic tool for explaining the complexities and realities of discrimination and power, and the ways in which they intersect with our students' identities. Bri's story embodies this complexity, and thus provides an avenue through which students and teachers can see a commitment to honoring the richness of identities in classroom spaces.

Kindred (1979), by Octavia Butler

This science fiction tale incorporates elements of time travel as the main protagonist, Dana, is magically transported back and forth between her life as a 26-year old Black woman living in California in the 1970s, to a plantation in the antebellum South. Each time she travels back in time, she seems to stay for longer and longer stretches, intricately intertwining her life with the plantation community in dangerous ways that force her to make some life-altering choices.

Dominant approaches to teaching about the period of chattel slavery in the US tend to essentialize this hard fact of American history as a static event that happened in the past. In stark contrast, *Kindred* illustrates important connections between the embarrassing past that discourses of colorblind racism endeavor to convince us are over and done with in a post-racial society (Hill Collins, 2009; Kirkland, 2021), and a living, breathing, embodied present where issues of racism and sexism are far from being resolved.

Like a Love Story (2019), by Abdi Nazemian

Like a Love Story is set in New York City in 1989 and features the interconnected lives of three teenagers as they grow up at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Reza is an Iranian boy who has recently relocated with his mother to the States where they now live with his new stepfather and stepbrother. Reza knows he is gay, but is terrified of confronting this truth as he is inundated with media depictions of gay men dying slow, painful deaths from AIDS. At his new high school, he quickly befriends Judy, an aspiring fashion designer who idolizes her uncle Stephen, an activist in the gay community. Through Judy he is also introduced to Art, her best friend and the only openly gay teenage boy in their entire school.

The author of *Like a Love Story*, Abdi Nazemian, is himself a queer Iranian immigrant. In this work of historical fiction, he does a great job of neither glorifying the lives of queer people in this period in space and time, nor painting the gay community as monochromatically tragic. The book is full of hope, and through Reza's journey of coming to terms with his identity and coming out, opens up space in the curriculum for the voices of communities of historically marginalized sexual orientations. In addition, it provides a seamless avenue for discussing social issues that are still highly relevant to students' lives in society today.

Lessons Learned

As mentioned above, we leveraged Muhammad's framework to design a 10-day unit plan focused on exploring students' identities and backgrounds. Each day's lesson contained an opening activity to recall and activate prior knowledge; a hook to garner students' attention; a work session where the teacher's role was primarily as facilitator, giving students space to engage the content collaboratively and on their own terms; and a student-led closing activity, sometimes with an embedded formative assessment. Once the unit was completed, Matt presented the plans to his collaborative planning team with the idea that they could implement the unit in the weeks following state standardized testing. Typically his team aimed to work through the bulk of required standards in preparation for state tests, leaving some room at the end of the school year for more creative or advanced projects. Though he reported that the other three teachers on his grade level planning team were initially enthusiastic about implementing the plans, they ultimately did not end up teaching the unit because it was not approved by their grade level administrator. The simple explanation Matt received was that the texts contained "controversial" topics, and his administration had concerns about angry parents. Matt's school is a highly competitive, primarily White institution, located in an affluent and politically conservative area. Though we cannot attest with any accuracy to the motivations of the administrator who decided against teaching the unit, what little feedback we did receive suggested that it stemmed from a fear of backlash from a highly litigious and active parent population.

Implications

This roadblock brings up an important limitation to this study in that not all teachers will feel equally empowered to tackle critical issues in their instruction. The current political climate in parts of the US has been incredibly hostile to instruction on critical topics, such as Florida's passage of the "Don't Say Gay" bill that strictly prohibits instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity (Diaz, 2022); or Georgia's "divisive concepts" bill that vaguely prohibits educators from teaching such concepts as dysconscious racism, or that the US is a fundamentally racist nation (Dalton, 2022). These are merely two examples of over 100 different bills recently introduced in 35 states that limit what schools can teach around subjects like race, history, politics, sexual orientation, and gender (Gross, 2022). This limitation, however, we also choose to see as a strength, as it speaks directly to the paramount importance of continuing to teach students to think critically.

Another important implication we feel called to highlight here is the importance of recognizing and naming the role of Whiteness in complicating the work of teaching and learning. One of the defining characteristics of dominator culture (hooks, 2003) is a fear of open conflict (Okun, 2022), otherwise generally experienced by White people as an entitlement/right to comfort. Feminist scholars have long argued for attentiveness to the exclusivity inherent in our shared institutions, schools included, which were designed with a default body in mind that is both male and White (Benhabib et al., 1995; Davies et al., 2005). Speaking in broad generalities, therefore, White people can, for the most part, be guaranteed that they feel comfortable navigating shared social spaces, understanding, of course, that our identities intersect in complex ways: being poor, a non-native English speaker, a woman, queer, dis/abled, or any other of an infinite representations of the broad swath of human diversity complicates this oversimplified picture. Therefore White people can become accustomed to not having to feel uncomfortable in educational spaces. This privilege is something that all White educators, in particular, need to interrogate when Whiteness acts to convince us that certain topics should be avoided. Whether we provide our students with safe spaces to discuss issues like racism, prejudice, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and classism or not, young adolescents are having these conversations. The question is whether or

not educators can confront our own discomfort and provide safe containers to facilitate these conversations in productive and empowering ways.

Conclusion

> No type of pedagogy, however effective, can single handedly remove the barriers of racism, discrimination, homophobia, segregation, Islamophobia, homelessness, access to college, and concentrated poverty, but antiracist pedagogy combined with grassroots organizing can prepare students and their families to demand the impossible in the fight for eradicating these persistent and structural barriers. (Love, 2019, p. 19)

By means of conclusion, it bears mentioning that although we cannot possibly overstate the importance of utilizing culturally and historically relevant frameworks to inform our teaching, no single pedagogical approach in and of itself will be sufficient in addressing the multiple systemic and institutionalized injustices that we all – students and teachers alike – face. As Dr. Bettina Love (2019) warns, we cannot confuse educational reform with justice. The neoliberal turn[1] in education has led to an increased tendency towards privatization, scripted curriculum, standardized assessments and benchmarks, and a deprofessionalization of teaching characterized by increased accountability regimes and a concurrent decrease in teacher autonomy (Au, 2016; Brown et al., 2016; Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Gale de Saxe et al., 2020).

So long as this trend continues unchecked by open and sustained critique from those members of the system best informed to bear witness to its insidious impacts – again, a role filled by students and teachers alike – spaces to create genuine, human bonds with our students will continue being gradually eliminated, as they are reduced to mere automatons in the banking model of education and as we, their teachers, are ourselves reduced to mere purveyors of prepackaged content (Trinter & Hughes, 2021). Truly responsive education, contexts that are respectful of students' histories, curricula that is relevant to their lived experiences, and schools that provide space for them to engage safely in issues that matter to them, has never been more critical.

However, as two cisgender, heterosexual, typically-Abled, socioeconomically privileged White people, we as the authors must also provide a word of caution to our eager readers who, perhaps like ourselves, may carry significant blind spots as a result of occupying multiple privileged identities. The work of cultivating culturally and historically responsive classroom spaces does not start with a teacher's lesson planning, nor selection of curricular materials; it must start with the individual. Particularly for that vast majority of the teaching profession who are cis hetero White women, the journey must begin internally if we wish to create classroom cultures that minimize harm. Before White people endeavor to do this work, we must get well on our own terms (Love, 2019), which can begin by examining and interrogating our own biases and assumptions. In *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (2021), Bishop and Harrison speak to the importance of this internal labor, since…

> …even the most well-intentioned educators have implicit biases that influence their teaching practices…It is precisely because of educators' commitments to supporting their students that it is important to be aware of how their implicit bias impacts their teaching in order to reduce unintended inequitable outcomes. (p. 14)

They continue to explain how implicit bias is a normal part of cognitive functioning, connected to both positive and negative stereotypes around such identity categories as race, class, and gender. In an inequitable society like the US, what bell hooks (2003) refers to as an "imperialist capitalist white supremacist patriarchy" (p. 32), racism is not simply a shameful character trait found in ignorant individuals. Rather, as Black feminist scholar Dr. Patricia Hill Collins (2009) explains, it is a matrix of power that operates on bodies at multiple levels, including the disciplinary, cultural, structural, and of course, the individual level of our interactions with one another in society. In order to disrupt this pervasive matrix, White educators must work through the paralyzing power of White guilt and concomitant fears of

[1] Want more information on neoliberalism in education? Please see this resource, collaboratively created under the direction of Dr. Ajay Sharma: http://neolib.uga.edu/index.php

being forever more labeled a racist. As Dr. Muhammad (2019) explains, “When teachers ask immediately for the strategies, I know they haven’t first cultivated their thinking and love for this work and the students they teach” (p. 56). Though the work of deconstructing and reconstructing the curriculum so that it can be rebuilt in culturally and historically responsive ways is certainly urgent and critical work, privileges are also accompanied by blind spots. It is a luxury to be ignorant to some of the burdens encumbering members of society whose race, class, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or ability prevents their bodies from extending into space in disorienting ways (Ahmed, 2006). For educators of privilege particularly – be that heterosexuality, ability, Whiteness, cisnormativity, Christianity, wealth, or any number of complex and intertwined identity markers – we must first unpack and make sense of our own histories, identities, biases, racisms, and the ways we use literacy practices in our own lives. This is an uneasy process to be sure, for we are always becoming, and this will always be a work in progress as the world changes. Our invitation to fellow educators is that we must change with it. We hope with this paper to have outlined a productive starting point, and wish all readers more success in their journeys than perhaps we have had starting out.

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