

21. THE ROLE OF FAITH IN ADVOCATING FOR BLACK MINDS

Regardless of the circumstances in school or society, it is evident that Black people, particularly Black males, are often criminalized. This criminalization can lead to people being adversely impacted by a ubiquitous devaluing of Black lives. Black Lives Matter represents an emphatic statement saying “Black Lives Matter *Too*” – not more than others, and certainly not less than others. They matter to the same degree that other lives do, or at least they should.

In a society that denigrates Black people, however, the assertion that Black Lives Matter must be made to help demonstrate the validity of a value that is not widely held. Of course, most agree with the notion that Black Lives Matter, at least in theory. But theory divorced from action is misguided at best, and self-deception at worst. Belief must be met with action.

The Black Lives Matter movement helps to translate these same concerns to educational settings. Often in schools, Black children are disproportionately represented in special education, overrepresented in schools’ exclusionary discipline practices. Frequently, this kind of *pushout* starts in early childhood setting and often becomes school and life trajectories for Black students.

This reality begs the question, do educators truly believe that Black Lives and Minds Matter? The conditions of the educational experiences of Black youth may suggest otherwise. We argue that one cannot value Black minds unless the lives of Black people are cared for. How can one value the mind if they do not value the life?

Our research and practice as educators is motivated by the goal of expressing the value of Black lives and minds. Though we are representative of several fields of study, including early childhood postsecondary education (Idara Essien), special education and postsecondary education (Rebecca Neal), our intellectual spaces within these fields focus on Black learners.

A salient theme across our work is the notion that educators must validate students, express authentic care, centre learning within their lived socio-cultural experiences, and convey high expectations for student achievement performance. While the educational research literature is certainly attentive to these topics, our goal in advocating for these principles emanates from another source, our faith.

While we identify as scholars of colour, our identities are also directly tied to our collective Christian faith, spirituality, and religiosity. These concepts refer to our belief in God (faith), our connection to the spiritual realm (spirituality), and

the manner in which we live and carry out that faith (religiosity). Our faith teaches us that children and those who are downtrodden by society are to be supported and protected.

In particular, the Christian religion teaches us to protect and nurture children. In Matthew 18, verse 5, Jesus instructed his followers by stating “And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me.” In the subsequent verse, a warning is provided to anyone who would treat a child in a manner that would take them off of a righteous path.

As faith-based scholars of colour, we view this verse (and many others) as a clarion call to humanize educational experiences. We also use this verse to guide us in how to produce outcomes for our children and youth that are desirable. This represents the translation of the spiritual context to the academic context, where the same concept is applied in different spaces, in different ways.

Although the manner in which some in the Black Lives Movement advocate for similar principles differ; often it is based on the level of anger associated with the mistreatment of Black people. However, this anger can lead to very different places. Here is a collective reflection on resolving this anger in fruitful ways:

Right now, there are many people who are angry. And anger in and of itself is not bad. But anger leads to two diverging paths, it can lead to hate, and hate only destroys, lowers, and hurts. The other path is righteous indignation, where our anger is harnessed to provoke direct action that remediates the factors that have given rise to our anger. We must choose our paths wisely, as they lead to very different places, and there is nothing worse than choosing a path that leads us to make decisions we cannot change.

Education at all levels should provide students with a safe haven to learn. However, for some Black students, schools are not safe havens. In these settings, some schools are commonly more aptly viewed as battlefields where learners are repeatedly exposed to disparate experiences, conditions, and outcomes.

Often, these challenges begin early on, during the formative years of schooling in early childhood and continue throughout students’ educational pathways. While some students will successfully traverse the numerous pitfalls that await them, many will be pushed out along the way. Whether this attrition occurs in elementary, junior high, high school, or college, the reality is that far too few Black students succeed in the American educational system.

There are a number of reasons why this occurs. For some, the challenge of school success is compounded by life conditions such as financial pressures, family concerns, or even stressful life events (such as food and housing insecurities). Harmfully, these pressures are often cited by teachers and faculty who educate Black students as the primary factors limiting their success.

Understanding students through such a deficit lens increases the prevalence of negative racial stereotypes regarding Black students which cannot be ignored. These stereotypes fall into a number of categories, but are most simply described as

erroneous assumptions that portray Black learners as being academically inferior, having a deviant persona, deriving from cultures that are apathetic, and successes that are solely confined to athletic pursuits.

Beyond these challenges, many Black learners are also taught by educators who have little to no formal training in teaching students of colour. Further, there can be lack of knowledge in those educators understanding the nuances and within group differences of Black communities. Such a lack of understanding is only intensified by the inadequate educational preparation and performance of educators who typically teach Black children, youth, and adults.

While in years past, these trends may have been glossed over and ignored, more attention is being paid to the plight of Black learners. Highlighted is the criminalized manner in which these learners are portrayed. Largely, this attention is a function of increased Black vigilance around the nation and heightened levels of resistance due to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Yvette Smith, Tamir Rice, Oscar Grant III, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Alton Sterling, Tanisha Anderson, Philando Castile, Alfred Olongo, and Sandra Bland. These are a few of the numerous names of Black women and men who have been killed at the hands of law enforcement and those in positions of authority. Sadly, many nameless Black students also die a metaphoric death as a result of their derisory school experiences.

Classrooms are the intersection where research, policy and practice meet. However, instead of a harmonious existence, a crash has occurred leaving Black students *disabled*. In a broader sense, schools have become an educational battlefield that places teachers and Black students on the front lines where these students are coming home *wounded* from not being taught at school or *losing their lives* to (mis) education.

Challenges of Black youth and young adults are unlike any other student. The state of education for Black students can easily be described as precarious, grim, and at times seemingly hopeless. Students are *dying in record numbers to the 'bullets' of overrepresentation in special education and disproportionate representation in school discipline* being aimed at them. Beyond school, other *'bullets'* being aimed at Black students are poverty, low teacher expectations and the deadliest of them all, *the expectation of school and life failure*.

Adding to the complexity of students' school experiences, Black children hear negative associations to the word black: black hole, black market, blackball, blacklisted, blackmail (black male), and the like. Understanding that word associations can positively or negatively influence a child's identity, the vignette presented describes one teacher's intentional practice to positively shape self-image of kindergarten age students in special education attending an urban school.

Mr. Reed, a kindergarten teacher is coloring with his students when he hears students talking about how ugly the colors black and brown are. Black is ugly. I don't want black. I don't want black either. Yuck. Brown is yucky too. I don't

want brown either. Listening to the children, and understanding that Black also a cultural referent, Mr. Reed intentionally makes positive associations to the terms black and brown. During coloring time, he can regularly be heard saying how much he loves black and brown, and that those are his two favorite colors. This behavior and language is also modeled by the other adults in the classroom. As the school year continues, Mr. Reed notices students change their narrative and begin indicating that black and brown are appealing colors. Although Mr. Reed's associations to black and brown can easily be seen as trivial, he was intentional in how he worked to disrupt students' negative connotations of black and brown. By the end of the school year, it warmed Mr. Reed's heart to hear the students say, how much they loved black and brown.

Despite the consistent mistreatment of Black learners by educators and the negative constructions of Black identities, our faith encourages us to take a second path, one of righteous indignation. We are taught to love ourselves, and both our enemies and our neighbours. Emboldened by our faith, we believe that all educators should be engaged with tone of acceptance, love, and positive self-imagery. We embrace difficult conversations and address subliminal messaging on educational injustice from this standpoint.

Our faith and research enables us to better understand the role that racism and stereotypes plays on the educational experiences of Black learners. The deleterious outcomes of minoritizing education require that we engage educators in critical conversations on the role of implicit bias, privilege, advantage, and micro aggressions. Such discourse is certainly not comfortable, however, a love for educators and for learners requires that our belief in the detrimental nature of most cross-racial interactions is met with action that tries to create better student experiences.

These challenges represent the need to change hearts and perspectives of Black children. The current condition of education is a heart condition; educator's actions are an outgrowth of their hearts. We believe the vast majority of educators want to better educate and support Black learners. The challenge is not a function of a lack of care, but instead a lack of understanding of what to do. Educators must be taught about the importance of cultural relevancy, collaborative learning, and anti-deficit perspectives. It is essential that we begin to better provide these educators with strategies and practices that can work to improve outcomes for Black students.