



The revolutionary act of teaching Black children superbly

BY SHARIF EL-MEKKI

James Baldwin, in his “Talk to Teachers,” describes effective teaching as a revolutionary act. At the Center for Black Educator Development, the organization I founded and lead,

we have doubled down and built on Baldwin’s iconic description. We believe that to teach Black children *superbly* is a revolutionary act. In service of that goal, we prepare educators to instill in Black children a positive sense of their own

racial identity and, in so doing, equip them with the literacy, numeracy, and myriad social-emotional skills they will need to be lifelong leaders and activists in the revolutionary work of advancing equity in all its forms.

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We believe that increasing teacher diversity is the essential lever for building a more just and high-quality public education system. This work is urgent, because there can be no social and racial justice without educational justice. Our nation's centuries-long racist legacy of structural disadvantage, and the daily toll that disadvantage takes on our families and children, makes our work a moral imperative.

Our charge at the Center for Black Educator Development is twofold. We work to strengthen the pipeline of Black and Brown teachers and, at the same time, equip the teachers of today and tomorrow with the cultural humility and understanding to effectively teach Black and Brown children.

THE FOUNDATION OF OUR WORK: TEACHER DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Multiple rigorous studies have demonstrated the value of teacher diversity (Camera, 2018). Simply put, when Black students have Black teachers, they do better in school. When they have one Black teacher by 3rd grade, they're 13% more likely to enroll in college. With two Black teachers in the mix early on, that stat jumps to 32%. For Black boys from low-income households, their on-time high school graduation rate soars by almost 40% (Underwood, 2019).

Unfortunately, Black teachers only

make up 7% of the teacher workforce. Teachers who identify as Black men make up less than 2% of the workforce. In fact, the majority of students never have a Black teacher at all from kindergarten to 12th grade. Nationally, our teaching corps is nearly 80% white.

But we do not simply have a dearth of Black and Brown teachers, we have an utter failure to prepare all teachers to teach Black and Brown children (El-Mekki, 2019). More than seven in 10 graduates from our teachers colleges say they feel unprepared to teach in urban settings. More than six in 10 say they feel unprepared to teach culturally diverse students (Jordan et al., 2018). Both our initial teacher education institutions and on-the-job professional learning are largely failing to provide teachers with the skills they need to deliver equitable, high-quality education to Black and Brown students.

FREEDOM SCHOOLS LITERACY ACADEMY

Our center's Freedom Schools Literacy Academy is a five-week program that simultaneously nurtures young Black and Brown scholars and teacher apprentices who will one day lead their own classrooms. It is grounded in research that shows Black and Brown children learn best when positive racial identity is deeply embedded in the pedagogical framework and curriculum. Identity is

not separate and apart from teaching, but indeed essential for the high-quality teaching of Black and Brown children. The program integrates the best practices of the Children's Defense Fund and Philadelphia Freedom Schools with a culturally responsive, affirming, and sustaining early literacy curriculum.

Rising 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-grade scholars are taught by Black college-aged teaching interns who are in turn supported by Black high school-aged apprentices. For seven intensive weeks, five of which are spent providing literacy instruction to our young scholars, these high-potential college and high school students gain real teaching experience, pedagogical understandings, and tools designed to inspire and encourage their future career in education.

Steeped in Black culture, history, and pedagogy, our work provides the aspiring teachers and students alike with the ethical foundation built on the Freedom Schools tradition, which we believe has particular relevance for the teaching profession writ large. Its essential tenets include:

- We lean and stand on the shoulders of giants. By knowing and deeply understanding our intellectual genealogy as Black servant leaders, we empower ourselves and our students.
- Our work in education is

to train our replacements. By viewing the work in this way, how we think about our obligation to our students (and our community), our accountability to them and each other, is transformed.

- We lift as we climb. This tenet creates an intergenerational approach and feeds the pipeline of future educators. As today’s teachers and our apprentices see that just as someone has poured themselves into me, I, too, must pour my soul and life’s work into those who follow me.

Our interns and apprentices participate in action research, engage in dynamic lectures and lessons, and receive mentoring and coaching from master teachers, including experts like Greg Carr from Howard University. Apprentices develop their lessons for scholars in a collaborative way, unlike the isolated way that is typical in schools, and they are recorded and discussed together. They polish their lesson plans in a community and record and discuss their teaching practice in public, supportive ways.

The results speak for themselves. Our interns and apprentices all report increased knowledge of Black history and pedagogy as well as greater confidence in speaking out against injustice. Fully 96% of participants reported an increased interest in pursuing a career in teaching and *all* participants reported an increased interest in teaching Black children. By the end of this summer, we will have taught almost 200 high school and college teacher apprentices.

Most encouraging, we are seeing that empowering teachers in this way benefits their students as well. Last year alone, our 104 participating scholars (in grades 1 through 3) showed the following:

- Increased positive views of themselves, their communities, and their racial identities;
- Statistically significant gains in targeted vocabulary *and* reading

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Bristol, T. (2014).** *Black men of the classroom: A policy brief of how Boston Public Schools can recruit and retain Black male teachers.* schottfoundation.org/sites/default/files/TravisBristol-PolicyBrief-BlackMaleTeachers.pdf
- **Carver-Thomas, D. (April 2018).** *Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color.* Learning Policy Institute.
- **Center for Black Educator Development. (n.d.).** *Academies.* www.thecenterblacked.org/academies
- **Gershenson, S., Hart, C.M.D., Lindsay, C.A., & Papageorge, N.W. (2017).** *The long-run impacts of same-race teachers.* IZA Institute of Labor Economics. www.iza.org/publications/dp/10630
- **Gobir, N. (2021).** *Strategies for retraining teachers of color and making schools more equitable.* Mindshift. KQED.
- **U.S. Department of Education (2016).** *The state of racial diversity in the educator workforce.* Author.

comprehension;

- Reading skills jumped more than three word-reading levels, on average, which amounts to a 70% improvement in word reading;
- Scholars working on more advanced reading skills read nearly 21 more words per minute on average upon completing the program. That’s more than 240% better than the average rate gain for 1st and 2nd graders over a four-week period.
- Scholars grew on average from the 41st percentile to the 60th percentile in oral reading fluency based on national grade-level norms in just four weeks.

EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE WORKSHOPS

The Center engages both aspiring and veteran educators in educational justice professional learning to help them build the skills and mindsets to lead with cultural humility, cultural fluency, and self-reflection. We base this work on Culturally Relevant Competencies (Skills) we adopted and adapted from New America’s national survey of promising practices

(Muñiz, 2019), as well as Black pedagogy and scholarship from leaders such as Muhammad Khalifa, Gholdy Muhammad, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Carter G. Woodson, and Asa Hilliard. We incorporate concepts such as cultural competence, critical consciousness, moral courage, healing-centered practices, and racial uplift.

In the professional learning sessions, we use a mix of instructional presentation, dynamic discussion, practice, and real-time feedback loops. Sessions are built to meet the unique needs of participants, their context, and the communities they serve. We address topics that include Reflecting on One’s Cultural Lens & Individual Cultural Identity; Drawing on Students’ Culture to Inform Curriculum and Instruction; Bringing Real-World Issues Into the Classroom; Collaborating With Families and the Local Community; Understanding the Tenets and Nuance of Micro-Aggression(s); and more.

COLLABORATION WITH TEACHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Greater collaboration between teacher preparation programs and schools serving Black and Brown children is also essential. As I have written elsewhere, our teachers colleges

are frustratingly slow to evolve and our teacher effectiveness and retention rates in our most challenged schools are evidence of their failure (El-Mekki, 2021). Black and Brown education and child development experts remain largely invisible in our schools of education. Dewey, Skinner, Mann, and Montessori must be supplemented with the likes of Septima Clark, Carter G. Woodson, Amos N. Wilson, Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Marva Collins, and Jawanza Kunjufu. How can we expect our teachers to know and nurture the minds of Black and Brown children when they know nothing of great Black and Brown minds?

The center is working with several teacher preparation programs and school systems to set shared goals and establish a sense of accountability to Black and Brown communities. Doing so can raise the bar and create alignment between the curriculum that aspiring teachers receive in teacher preparation, the professional learning teachers engage in once on the job, and the teaching they practice in classrooms with Black and Brown children.

This body of work, like our Freedom Schools Literacy Academies, is simultaneously improving teaching today and building the pipeline of culturally responsive and competent teachers for tomorrow. It is challenging but ultimately rewarding work for us and our partners.

In the Freedom Schools tradition, adults, mentors, and teachers are expected to train their replacements. We approach this work as Black educator hall of famer Mary Church Terrell did, “lifting as we climb” (Ishak, 2021). We believe that to increase the

number of Black teachers, we need to carefully design, bolster, and reinforce a national Black teacher pipeline. We intend to begin this work in 10 cities over the next decade. The center aims to build 10 comprehensive Black Teacher Pipeline consortiums in 10 cities by 2035, contributing 21,000 Black teachers into the pipeline and 9,100 into the workforce.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Taken together, this work provides a foundation for better, more culturally informed teaching for not just Black and Brown teachers, but all educators. Our Freedom Schools Literacy Academies provide a model of teacher development that can be replicated. Our work with currently serving teachers is having a profound impact on their attitudes, competencies, and pedagogical capacity. Our work to remake teacher preparation programs helps teachers have the cultural fluency and humility to teach Black and Brown students and serve their communities (National Council on Teacher Quality, n.d.). All of this work is making a difference as it yields ever more of that radical activity of superbly teaching Black and Brown children.

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Sharif El-Mekki (sharif.el-mekki@TheCenterBlackED.org, onmicrosoft.com) is the founder and chief executive officer of the Center for Black Educator Development. ■



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