



To thrive, students need a ‘homeplace’ at school

BY SHATERA WEAVER

“Next stop: Vaaaalhalla; Where the Vikings go to die.”

I can still hear each additional “a” the train conductor used to embellish his pronunciation of Valhalla. I remember not only because it made passengers chuckle each time, but also because his melodic announcement was music to my ears.

It meant I was only two stops away from home: White Plains, New York. Valhalla may have been where Vikings went to die, but it was also the train stop I awaited to resume living fully.

I had the privilege of attending a renowned private middle school in upper Westchester, New York. On the other end of that 35-minute Metro North train ride, I was able to dabble in

softball, figure skating, theater, dance team, and more. I earned awards, learned Latin, and had access to a middle school education for which my classmates were paying college tuition prices, all with the support of a needs-based scholarship I worked tirelessly to lose.

From 6th to 8th grade, I got into fights, broke dress code, even purposefully dropped my grades,

because amid all the standards-based critical thinking skills I learned there, I also learned that I didn't belong. Ostracized as a result of otherness, I never felt at home.

When we pulled off from Valhalla, it seemed that both the train and I let out a sigh of relief. My shoulders relaxed and the clench in my jaw loosened. That lighthearted announcement meant my heart could lighten.

A couple of decades and educational degrees later, I know now that it wasn't home I was looking — and sometimes fighting — for at school. It was a *homeplace*. In her essay *Homeplace*, social activist and author bell hooks defines a homeplace as a space where Black people are able to “recover our wholeness” and “where we can be affirmed in our minds and hearts ... where we could restore ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world” (hooks, 1990).

In her book *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, Bettina Love references hooks's idea of a homeplace as a “space where black folk truly matter ... where souls are nurtured, comforted and fed” (Love, 2019, p. 63). My middle school experience leaves me wondering how many minds schools are feeding, but souls they are starving.

As dean of culture at the Metropolitan Expeditionary Learning School in New York, my approach to social and emotional learning (SEL) is not just about building skills. It's about making school a homeplace for all

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Here are student responses on a survey given to gather feedback in February 2021.

Anything you'd like to say or ask about BAM!?

- i love it, and i will continue to be consistent and keep joining every friday ;3
- It's pretty valid, more or less like an escape for me.
- Can I plz be a co leader for the Club!!! It would be a great experience.
- Well I hope I become a leader, if only this is the one time I have stepped forward yo lead something because I believe in it.
- This Group is great
- This group is really chill and I actually look forward to coming here every week :D

students, particularly Black students. I have made it my mission to tend to the souls of our Black students because I want them to do more than just survive and bide their time until they begin living again when they head home.

Creating a homeplace is central because SEL is a process that begins with creating safe and equitable spaces for students to first be their whole selves. This is the foundation on which they can develop effective knowledge and skills to be able to feel and show

empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

I began cultivating a homeplace for Black students with an affinity group, and that work has grown to include affinity spaces for other student groups, alongside professional learning for staff that is laying the foundation for other important work to come.

THE BAM! AFFINITY GROUP

Inspired by the work of Love and hooks, I created an affinity group for Black students as a homeplace and piloted it over the past school year. Research reinforces the importance of belonging in a learning community (Allen, 2021), and this affinity group is my way of offering a “small private reality where Black [students] can renew their spirits and recover themselves” (hooks, 1990).

Unfortunately, the research on school-aged racial affinity groups is limited. Yet I find that the most important facilitation move I make is to simply be myself and allow students to do the same. With that foundation, this homeplace that students and I continue to curate with one another is a mutually gratifying space where we can learn, support one another, and nurture growth.

The Black at MELS (BAM!) affinity group formed at the onset of the 2020-21 school year. We meet every Friday after school and have four core portions to our time together.

First, we check in with a reflection

of the week we're bringing to a close. Black joy is fortified through games, then we move on to the day's topic of learning and discussion. It might be learning about the life and legacy of the late Cicely Tyson, co-designing our BAM! uniform T-shirts, or mourning the murder of Daunte Wright.

To close, we provide space for students to share anything they want to be heard. The center of our circle is there to hold whatever it is that students may wish to put down or uplift.

Students describe BAM! as the highlight of their schooling experience. In a survey given during one of our Friday afternoon meetings in February 2021, one student even asserted that BAM! was an escape for him.

This declaration speaks volumes, especially in the context of remote learning, when students have spent much of the past school year at home. A number of students even reached out to me when they realized that there was no school for the Lunar New Year, asking if we could meet anyway. Never have I ever heard of students asking for school activities on their day off!

In the affinity group, students have made meaningful connections with learning in and out of school. One high school junior writes: "Unapologetically Black and Cultural Diversity are two principles of BLM [Black Lives Matter] that I see exemplified in my life because in the black affinity group with Ms. Weaver that I joined we talk about how being black doesn't necessarily mean one thing or the other, the black community is vast, and they shouldn't be ashamed of who they are or try to change because of society's norms."

BEYOND BAM!

The BLM Week of Action in Schools is a national campaign to promote a set of national demands based on the Black Lives Matter guiding principles that focus on improving the school experience for students of color.

In recognition of the week of action, a few staff members at

STAFF REFLECTIONS

6th grade

In Cities expedition students are investigating who has access to green spaces and who doesn't. They are learning the historical factors and systemic racism that created these conditions today. They are designing plans to address this inequity. There is also opportunity to connect this local example to what's happening in the country and world.

In Decision 2020, we also studied voting rights as a part of the case study, specifically addressing racism historically and today.

7th grade

7th Grade Science brought in experts for our PANDEMIC case study. We had doctors who worked on the frontlines come to speak with and answer questions about their experiences. Students were amazing and so engaged.

Favorite Moment: X asked Dr. Pean, a Haitian/Mexican American, if he felt a sense of belonging when going through school/work. He then shared his experience and encouraged all students to pursue their goals regardless of the "norm." It was beautiful and amazing. <3

9th grade

In our Spring expedition, we planned a kickoff experience in which students engaged with a poem "The Tradition" by Assata Shakur. Students examined the message of the poem, which focuses on the legacy of Black resistance. Our Expedition, "Carry It On" aims to continue this exploration of resistance and revolution culminating with students joining existing resistance movements.

11th grade

During our expedition class, we used the lens of access. This has allowed for deeper conversations than we've had in the past. It set a good tone for discussions for our classes throughout the year.

We specifically looked at access to SATs, redlining, disability rights, financial access. Students made personal connections, but we also talked about it on a bigger level.

Metropolitan Expeditionary Learning School created affinity groups for students from other backgrounds. That week, we offered a variety of affinity groups to meet the needs of our diverse student population. The action continues with four racial affinity groups that are now ongoing at the school so that all students have the chance to show up as their authentic selves and achieve their best.

But our work to create homeplaces goes beyond affinity groups. In her book, Bettina Love states that "there is no one way to be an abolitionist teacher. Some teachers will create a homeplace for their students while teaching them with the highest expectations; some will

protest in the streets; some will fight standardized testing; some will restore justice in their classrooms; some will create justice-centered curriculums and teaching approaches; some will stand with their students to end gun violence in schools; some will ... and some will do a combination of all of these" (Love, 2019, p. 90).

This school year, I have chosen to lean into the former, but other educators at Metropolitan Expeditionary Learning School are leaning into some of the other methods Love mentions.

Some teamed up to develop schoolwide experiences for students to process and learn about anti-Asian

racism and violence. Others created curricula that presented students with the opportunity to explore the Black Lives Matter at School 13 Principles, including a six-part series of lessons that asked students to reflect on personal experiences, engage in freedom dreaming, and ultimately take action toward a vision for how the 13 BLM principles can and should live within the school community.

A couple of colleagues shared homework assignments and class journal entries that their students wrote featuring their thoughts and experiences about participating in BAM!.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ABOUT ANTIRACIST PEDAGOGY

To support students' sense of belonging and their social and emotional development, educators have to continually listen, reflect, and learn about race and culture. This work cannot happen in isolation.

Fortunately, in my first year at the school, I met an educator, now friend, who was hired at the same time. I had never met a white woman who not only spoke openly about antiracism, but acted on it both in and out of the classroom.

After I spent an entire school year scoping out her intent and determining it wasn't purely performative, she and I started a brown bag learning circle that a handful of our colleagues opted into focused on antiracist pedagogy.

In that group, we developed a shared language to discuss topics regarding race and racism as a school. Once we had the language, we leaned into inquiry cycles about antibias education and how we can implement those practices in our classrooms. We also read literature with one another to inform our discussions and inquiry.

That informal brown bag has since evolved into our school's equity team. Established in 2018, the equity team's mission is to ensure that students have opportunities in classrooms to reflect on how their own identities and [hi]stories impact their understanding of the world

TO LEARN MORE

- www.dcareaeducators4socialjustice.org/black-lives-matter-week-action
- www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/
- www.dcareaeducators4socialjustice.org/black-lives-matter/13-guiding-principles
- www.nycoutwardbound.org/select-strategies/crew/
- www.edutopia.org/video/addressing-anti-asian-racism-students
- www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/13-guiding-principles.html
- eleducation.org/who-we-are/our-approach



around them, while faculty participates in similar work through thoughtful and continuous professional development.

To meet that mission, our team created a three-year trajectory for staff in the form of long-term learning targets.

Year One: I can engage in courageous conversations about identity.

- Who we are as individuals, including, but not limited to: race, class, gender and sexuality, privilege, ability, etc.

Year Two: I can explain how my identities affect the way I see and interact with the world.

- For example, my students, my classroom, coworkers, the curriculum I create, how I teach that curriculum, etc.

Year Three: I can implement antibias practices in my curriculum.

- Underpinning our work with the four goals of antibias education: identity, diversity, justice, and activism.

The first year, the staff read *Why*

Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? (Tatum, 1997) over the summer. In the fall, we established racial affinity groups composed of four to six staff members to debrief and discuss the text within.

It was important that, alongside all the courageous conversations we were facilitating as a whole staff or on teaching teams, we also provide safe spaces for discussion to happen among those with shared identity. I see this as the base for eventually piloting racial affinity groups with students.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As the final year of that three-year plan comes to a close, we're discussing where to go from here, as the work is far from done. In fact, we acknowledge there is no such thing as being "done" with this work.

For true social and emotional learning to take place, it must be intersected with antiracist social justice education. Dena Simmons finds that "educators often teach SEL absent of the larger sociopolitical context, which is fraught with injustice and inequity and affects our students' lives" (Simmons, 2019).

She asks, "Why teach relationship skills if the lessons do not reflect on the interpersonal conflicts that result from racism? Why discuss self and social awareness without considering power and privilege, even if that means examining controversial topics like white supremacy?" (Simmons, 2019).

I find that to be a powerful inquiry that educators should continue to grapple with as we equip students with the tools to create positive change within themselves and the world.

While we plan where the next three years take us, we have much to appreciate about the strides our school is making toward becoming a more actively antiracist institution — a school where all our students can find their homeplace. During our spring 2021 whole-staff professional development day, we reflected on the changes we had made in our school

because it’s always appropriate to celebrate your progress before mapping out next steps.

In addition, we recorded reflections from teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators on each grade team’s successes throughout the first half of the school year. (See p. 42.) These demonstrate some of the ways we were able to turnkey our efforts into practices for equity with and for our students.

These reflections illustrate the positive impacts our focus on antiracist and culturally responsive pedagogy had on our curriculum and our students. That curriculum is collaboratively built in interdisciplinary learning units called expeditions and case studies. The reflections refer to a number of those thoughtfully planned curricula (e.g. We’re Biased expedition and PANDEMIC case study) as inspiring meaningful learning experiences for students.

BELONGING AND JOY

Teaching in the midst of this simultaneous pandemic and racial reckoning, I find myself bringing to mind the quote often attributed to Maya Angelou: “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

What I want my students to feel is both belonging and joy. My work is guided by Bettina Love: “Black joy is finding your homeplace and creating homeplaces for others” (Love, 2019). I’ve found mine and am purposed with creating it for others.

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Coaching with SEL in mind

Continued from p. 39

learner? What learning styles do I learn best from?

- Am I coachable? Am I flexible? What are my strengths, and how can I continue to grow?
- How do I see myself as a leader? Am I willing to be open to feedback? Do I consider the viewpoints of others?

Your responses from these three questions will help your self-awareness before building relationships or entering into a coaching cycle. The next three questions focus on social awareness as you work your way through the collaborative coaching model. Each of your responses can be used to guide your own professional learning on coaching and social emotional learning.

- How do I provide support and advice?
- What does collaboration look like and feel like to me?
- How do I connect with others? How do I create opportunities

to connect?

Finally, ask yourself the following to determine your next steps:

- What ways do I reflect best?
- What are my takeaways from my reflection?

In the spirit of collaboration, please reach out to us if we can be your thought partners or answer any questions.

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