



Honoring history, cultivating genius



Muhammad

A CONVERSATION
WITH GHOLDY
MUHAMMAD

BY TANJI REED MARSHALL AND SUZANNE BOUFFARD

Gholnecsar (Gholdy) Muhammad is a leading voice for equity, anti-racism, and culturally and historically responsive teaching. A former teacher and school district curriculum director, she now researches and consults with school, district, and state leaders to implement culturally and historically responsive teaching. Her framework of historically responsive literacy is outlined in her book, *Cultivating Genius* (Scholastic, 2020).

The historically responsive literacy framework examines teaching strategies

and structures that honor the histories, identities, and literary practices of all youth from diverse cultures, and especially those who have been traditionally underserved in schools.

The framework builds on other work on culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies and is grounded in the history of Black literary societies, a rich source of education and intellectual pursuit led by Black scholars in the 19th century.

Muhammad looked to history to learn how these groups defined and shaped literacy — a term they used synonymously with education

— and wove key lessons into her recommendations for schools today. Those lessons include incorporating oral literacy, collaborative learning, interdisciplinarity, and social consciousness. She embeds them in a set of five educational pursuits: identity, criticality, intellect, skills, and joy.

This issue's editors, Tanji Reed Marshall and Suzanne Bouffard, spoke with Muhammad recently to learn more about how she is working with schools to embed those lessons and build equity through the historically responsive literacy framework. Excerpts of that conversation follow.

Your work calls for systemic change in order to achieve equity. Why is it important to approach the work systemically, and how do you do it?

I believe that schools and education systems reflect society. What we hold valuable, what we focus on, and how we structure schools reflects the humanity, or inhumanity, of society. So, if we're not addressing systems, it feels like we're doing "Band-Aid equity." It is key to examine the parts of the system that don't serve all students well.

We're always going to have limitations and feel incomplete until we get right as a country. But there are several structural parts of our education system that can be improved right away, even before those larger changes are made.

Your book outlines five pursuits that should be embedded in a historically and culturally responsive education. How can those pursuits be catalysts for systemic, actionable change?

The five pursuits are identity, skills, intellectualism, criticality, and joy. Most schools today are focused only on discrete skills and maybe some on intellectualism. But we need to go beyond just teaching skills. We need to honor and build students' humanity. To do that, there are five changes we need to make.

First, we need better learning goals. I don't like the word *standard*, because standard means we're learning this for school or for a test. Life goes on beyond the test. What if we had a new set of learning pursuits as a nation? Many people, including me, have rewritten learning standards to be more culturally responsive, but very few states have mandated them. If they did, if we had a new set of learning pursuits, imagine what we could do as a country.

Second, we need a full overhaul of assessments. Of the five pursuits, our schools typically assess skills only. Why don't we assess identity, joy, consciousness, or criticality? This is an easy solve as a nation with so much genius in it.

THE 5 PURSUITS OF HISTORICALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

Muhammad identifies five pursuits, or learning goals, from the history of Black literary societies. These five pursuits guide Muhammad's framework of culturally and historically responsive teaching.

Identity: Teaching students to know themselves and others.

Skills: Teaching students the proficiencies needed across content areas.

Intellectualism: Teaching students new knowledge.

Criticality: Teaching students to understand and disrupt oppression (hurt, pain, and harm within self and the world).

Joy: Teaching students about the beauty and truth in humanity.

Source: Muhammad, G. (2021). 12 questions to ask when designing culturally and historically responsive curriculum. AMLE. www.amle.org/12-questions-to-ask-when-designing-culturally-and-historically-responsive-curriculum/

Third, the curriculum we adopt and mandate is disconscious. It was never written to address the histories, identities, literacies, or liberation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. So guess who we struggle most to serve? Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. It's like we get upset when students can't fit into a dress that was not designed for their bodies. We keep asking, "Why do we have these achievement gaps?," but when we use curricula that are not designed for children of color, you should expect to see those gaps.

Fourth, we need to improve teacher evaluation. We have states that have written out guidelines and handbooks on culturally responsive pedagogy, but they still maintain teacher evaluation frameworks that say nothing about

criticality or identity.

Fifth, we need to improve teacher education for both preservice and inservice teachers. Teacher education programs must center anti-racism and critical work. We must not continue to perpetuate disconscious teaching. Often, you can leave the program and get your license without teaching or designing curriculum around justice.

When it comes to inservice professional learning, it's growing, and it ebbs and flows, but we know teachers and leaders need more support to implement anti-racist and culturally responsive teaching when they're in the field than they're currently getting.

You mentioned curriculum and assessment. What specific steps should schools take to rethink their approaches?

It's up to leaders to select and use the right curriculum, and that requires asking the right questions. People don't put enough emphasis on the content writers when they are evaluating curricula. I've worked with many publishers, and I don't often see consciousness in the work. I don't even see a lot of people who look like me.

When I work with districts that are adopting curricula, I ask questions like, "Who wrote the curriculum? Have you met them? Have they been successful teachers of BIPOC people?" I also ask about their vision of equity. It's not just about having diverse readings. It's also about the learning objectives and what is being taught, measured, and assessed. Is the curriculum only teaching skills? If so, it's not culturally responsive.

I recommend asking publishers if they have completed a culturally responsive scorecard on the curriculum and if they have conducted focus groups with students who are reflective of your student body. I have also given publishers a rubric on how to rewrite curriculum for our kids.

With assessments, I start by asking, "What can we change?" We can't change state assessments, but we can change school benchmark assessments.

For example, we can focus on bringing student voice into our assessments. We can ask students, “Does school give you joy? When are you most joyful during the school day? When was math joyful?” But first we have to define joy. It’s not just happiness; it’s a fulfillment of truth and justice and beauty.

We have to do this work now. Our ancestors didn’t just talk about change; they were doers of the word. They didn’t wait. We can’t wait.

This is comprehensive, long-term work. How do you build capacity for it throughout the system?

Start with leadership, especially the superintendent and the school board. How are they recruited and hired — what is required of them? We should require superintendents to teach a culturally responsive lesson plan before being hired. How can you lead in pedagogy if you don’t teach it?

We also have to rethink how superintendents are evaluated. To keep your job, you should have to show evidence of culturally responsive leadership. No one at Apple or Google is going to keep their job if they’re behind the times and they don’t display evidence of advanced technology expertise. But, for some reason, our education leaders can keep their jobs when they are behind the times. I am not saying it is always easy, but it is certainly possible.

Then you do this same work with principals. You change how they are recruited, hired, and evaluated. I also work with leaders on how to make the changes. I teach leaders how to write mission and vision statements and make plans of action to follow through.

This is nothing new, but what’s new about it is that we add things like equity, anti-racism, and culturally and historically responsive education. I teach them how to create and collect benchmarks and assessments of joy, criticality, and identity and to rethink how they assess skills and intellect.

Leaders have to create a culture and an environment for this among all their staff, so I also teach them how to lead and coach teachers, how to run a staff meeting, how to embody it in their speech and day-to-day work. Then we rewrite our documents, like our lesson and template documents. And in doing this, they must center love and joy.

What has the response been like from educators?

There have been three main responses: silence, head nods but no real action, and “we need this and we’re going to do it.” In some places, I am seeing the teachers union take this up and commit to it.

Leadership is a key factor. In districts that are most successful doing this work, superintendents show up to do the work. In one district I worked

with, which had about 40 schools, the superintendent showed up to every session, wrote curriculum with teachers, and created her own observation tool. It works when the leadership creates a tone and then holds others accountable to the expectations.

We all have to hold ourselves to those expectations and work on ourselves. As [education scholar] Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz says, we must engage in the archaeological exploration of self. We have to do that work before we can go further.

What other recommendations do you have for education leaders?

It’s possible to make change right now, tomorrow. The U.S. Department of Education gave a lot of autonomy to states and districts. We must start making policies and adopt a model where teachers can be trained to teach in more responsive ways.

It’s time for us to mandate justice for kids. We need to hold up humanity as much as we lift up the other things we hold valuable. This has been said by James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and others. It’s not new. But if we listen, if we start to do this more as a nation, we would see positive change for all.

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One simple question can accelerate progress toward equity

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are doing, cast a gimlet eye on the data, and say, “Your kids are doing better than mine. What are you doing?”

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