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INTRODUCTION

Invited Contribution: Revisiting MCTE Fall Conference 2019

SHAWNTAI BROWN

My nephew walked into my house lugging three stuffed bags indenting his small second-grade shoulders: the Spiderman pack filled with his notebooks, text books for math and English, and drawing pad for art; his Picachu lunch box filled with his favorite school-time treats and matching book bag filled with his computer supplies to participate in virtual school. My sister directed him to open his things, plug in his computer and prepare for his nearly seven-hour school day. He spent other weekdays with his father or another family member, shuffling between work schedules and carrying his school with him in his three bags. I acclimated him to his new Friday classroom in my house, right next to my office where I would continue working from home. We reviewed the art wall soon to be filled with his creations, the supply caddy with all of his pencils and crayons, the bookshelf with titles specially selected for him, the puppet pile for when he needs to enliven his experience, and the ancient Wii for when it's too rainy for an outdoor recess with the dogs. I was convinced I had provided the clean, organized and engaging environment for him to successfully attend virtual school.

My sister scurried off to work, and I sat next to my nephew as his English teacher came on camera and began taking attendance. My nephew waited with his camera on and his mic muted for his chance to say "here" at the calling of his name. As we waited, my girlfriend entered the room with a fresh cup of coffee for me. She peered into the screen as one kid after another unmuted to say "here" and "good morning", and then muted themselves again as directed. She smiled at the screen, peering into the tiny bubbles containing child faces on Microsoft Teams. "Are these your friends?" she asked.

"No. I don't know them," he said.

Suddenly the coffee felt less warm than I had first sensed.

"You don't talk to them?" I asked, more accusatory than I had intended. My mind raced. This was week five of school.

He is an only child. He has only had the opportunity to play with one other child in person since the pandemic shut down schools and most in-person activities.

"No. We can't talk to each other. You have to stay on mute."

For the entire school day, 8am-2:30pm, my nephew was invited to unmute his microphone five times to speak, mainly to his teacher, although his class could hear. Five times in seven hours his voice was invited into the conversation, often within the tight parameters of a one-word or one-sentence answer.

I was beside myself, unable to pay much attention to his class let alone my own stack of piling emails. Instead, my mind busied with worry. He doesn't talk to other children. He doesn't talk to them. He doesn't have the chance to have dialogue with people his age or play with them. His voice is muted most of the day when the very people who could most relate to him are nearly accessible, save that black line through his microphone icon. Worse, how long had this been going on? Surely this isn't new because of the pandemic.

Even in the pre-Covid classrooms, student voice and agency has had to compete with rigid curriculums and efforts to increase testing scores. While many educators are finding ways to make the most of the virtual and face-to-face educational opportunities, more than ever student voices are muted. And while there is no easy remedy, now is the time to amplify student voices and rethink our approaches with their input. Many students are missing those hallway discussions at lockers with friends -- their opportunities to discuss, dissect and define their world. The classroom, whether physical or virtual, can be the space where youth connect and bring their full selves to the learning process.

"The single problem plaguing all students in all schools everywhere is the crisis of disconnection," said Adam Fletcher, author and speaker focused on youth engagement. "Meaningful Student Involvement happens when the roles of students are actively re-aligned from being the passive

Figure 1. Shawntai Brown speaks at MCTE 2019.

recipients of schools to becoming active partners throughout the educational process.”

As people log into virtual classrooms and are auto-muted upon entry, voices must be awakened. The fall 2019 call to honor the voices of students through the questions *What do you want to know? What do you have to say? Who do you need to say it to?* was really a call to re-ignite critical literacy to give students the tools and opportunities to be able to decode themselves and from that point of knowledge, decode the world at large.

Through critical literacy we can empower students. Their voices must be the mortar of educational approaches and decisions. I do not write these proclamations from a history of perfection in allowing youth to lead, but rather an overcoming of fear: that if students lead they won’t get what they need.

When I first started thinking about literacy as a tool for social justice, I knew I wanted to dismantle the eurocentric approach to education in my practice and instill in my students the multi-linguistic skills necessary to navigate systems hot with gatekeepers. I was of course thinking inward. I entered Detroit-area schools armed with lessons and books telling Black history’s role in the shaping of America, used rap

lyrics to discuss housing segregation and economic disparities, photocopied pages full of Black girl magic-themed poems intent on lifting the downward heads of children. I thought I was doing the work of critical literacy, empowering youth through the texts of those who reflect their experiences. My idea of the youth who needed empowerment was so limited, but praise can be a blinder. White teachers thanked me for doing the work they didn’t feel prepared to do. Black teachers gave me an approving nod. All seemed well and good.

One fall, at a school sandwiched at the edge of Detroit and Hamtramck, I taught a group of elementary students in an after-school program for ELA and STEM support. Most of these students were from families of Yemeni refugees or were first-generation Americans. Their voices fluttered in and out of English and Arabic. Homework help was paused for prayer. I learned the eyes and voice of each one of the mothers who walked her children home. As the English instructor, I was tasked with improving student reading. Students were reluctant to read after a full day of school during which they had been told over and over to speak English, corrected on their pronunciation of words and phrases, chastised for whispering to their friends in Arabic, and forced to read books about people who looked nothing like them.

I recognized in these students what I had recognized in myself and the experiences of Black children I encountered: a sense of bewilderment with a classroom clearly not built with them in mind. But I, like their school, was a part of the continued bewilderment. My rejection of eurocentrism had not prevented me from being centric. My source materials were only of a particular kind of otherness: my own. My Black power sermons of “how history really happened” weren’t helping all students. My resources were very much limited to my own reflection, and my measure of worth, painfully, was conveyed only in contrast to the White world I had been taught as a child.

“The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves” (Horton 1990).

I wasn’t facilitating literacy but trying to bestow it upon students. My resources contained no bridge to access themselves within the materials. And so, even I – a Black queer woman who has long felt “othered” and marginalized, needed to learn how to decentralize myself in order to facilitate true learning more effectively.

Fortunately, many educators have long been striving to re-envision their teaching practice with the identities of their students in mind. Within the papers of this issue are maps, possible routes to take to decentralizing oneself. Educators are structuring standards around contemporary texts, bringing in diverse points of views, and inviting students to create the texts where they do not yet exist in bounty. The state has provided resources to infuse social-emotional learning into classrooms, but these skills must start within the leaders and facilitators of learning spaces. In this way, the educator stands to learn as much as their students, fostering collaboration and trustworthiness. Along with students, teachers are engaging in explorations of, self-awareness, social-awareness and responsible decision-making. These educators trust that their students come with intelligence and cultural knowledge already, and that knowledge is seen as a valuable and necessary contribution to the learning process.

The contributors to this issue have found students excel when they are invited to share their experiences and when their voices are considered integral to learning for all. Further, inviting opportunities for students to explore cultural issues and to mutually contribute to the learning process by sharing the knowledge they bring is trauma-informed practice. Building student voice into the culture of your classrooms and creating a balance of teaching and learning helps to make learning spaces more accessible to all students. Through pedagogical recommendations for practice, case studies, research and contemporary text suggestions, contributors answer the following:

- What does it mean to enact culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogies within the classroom?
- How do educators center the culturally and linguistically diverse identities, perspectives and practices of students (i.e. ways of being, ways of knowing, ways of communicating)?
- How do educators engage in reflection to decenter their own identities, positionalities, and experiences in classroom spaces?
- How do educators center students' voices and perspectives in their understanding of student outcomes, curriculum, language practices, texts, and instruction to build inclusive learning communities?

As evidenced in these papers, students can excel in environments receptive to their voices and the knowledge they bring. They empower youth through reading materials respectfully inclusive of their cultural experiences, invite them to create their own works of literature through which

to interrogate their world, or challenge laws and norms that unfairly silence the rich voices and abilities of students sometimes wrongly thought of as disadvantaged.

At the after-school program on the edge of Detroit and Hamtramck, the bookshelf meant to encourage them to read, lacked any reflection of their experiences. I took an inventory of the books available. Not one featured a character of Middle Eastern descent. No side-by-side books existed to allow Arabic readers and English readers to experience the same story or learn cross-linguistically. Even their bookshelf failed to see them as worthy of print. Not surprisingly, they passed the bookshelf for Legos and playdough. I requested a budget, researched and purchased titles featuring characters and historical figures that shared their language or religion, or region of origin, or complexion or interests.

When students passed the reading shelf, they saw more titles with darker-skinned men and boys on the cover, some with Arabic letters or Muslim names; books about food, books about sports and family. About adventure. About art. The girls, too, marveled at the covers, some featuring characters with hijabs.

"Where did these books come from?" they asked. "I didn't know I could be on a book."

Buying books and increasing reading scores wasn't the end of my work. I couldn't show up with a Santa sack of culturally-responsive literature and then pat myself on the back. I needed to create resources where they didn't exist, invite students to be the teachers of their own culture, ask them to write or illustrate the stories still missing from our shelves. And like my white teachers who had once thanked me, I felt unprepared and under resourced. But I wasn't alone. I had the students, the tutors of the program, the parents, and the daytime teachers at the school. Together, we would need to continue to build mirrors around our students so we could better see them, support them and maximize on the ways they were able to view and share themselves.

Approach this issue with this in mind. This work is continuous and collaborative.

While educators, as evidenced by this issue, are continuing to build their teaching practice around active engagement with texts relevant to the experiences of their youth, national level support for critical literacy is lagging. In our current climate, everything may be considered fake news. Readers of all ages increasingly need to be able to identify propaganda, write their own narratives, and interpret the evolving world around them.

Youth are in the streets protesting on behalf of Black lives, immigrant lives, Native land, LGBTQ+ rights, and

climate change, yet their voices are silent and regulated in many of their classrooms. They are demanding we listen. Two years ago, Detroit students sued the state for failing to provide sufficient literacy education. In midst of the pandemic, as many students tuned into their school day through the cracked screen of a parent's cell phone in an area with poor reception and lagging Wifi, the state settled the case, promising funding and "evidenced-based literacy" support to schools, especially in Detroit. This may seem like a victory, but the settlement canned the demand for literacy as a constitutional right, and kicked it down the road. We need to honor student voices at the national level, state level and in our classrooms.

Students showed their voices and their lives matter when they sued the state. While a financial settlement has been reached, this issue of literacy and access to power will not be solved with dollars. It will take listening to and amplifying the voices of our students as well as preparing and inviting our students to speak. Students were asking the state to provide the basic education needed to participate in our society. Through this issue, we as educators posit that our students deserve more than the basics. Further, if any of us expect to live in a more harmonious world, we need to learn from and build on the experiences we all bring to learning spaces.

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Shawntai Brown is a Detroit writer, literacy coordinator and teaching artist. Her work centers on empowering communities through experiences that educate, challenge and entertain. As a playwright, she is interested in the dialogue between script, actors, directors and audience, and how that informs and reshapes communities, especially concerning queer people of color. Also, she likes to laugh, and invites audiences to laugh as well. She has a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing from Western Michigan University and a Master of Arts in Literacy Learning from Marygrove College. You can find her poetry in Kaleidoscope, Cactus Heart, and Synaesthesia Magazine. She serves as the School Coordinator with InsideOut Literary Arts where she previously served as a teaching artist. She is a 2020 Krege Live Arts Fellow.