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To Be Young, Black, and In the Academy: A Collection of Lessons

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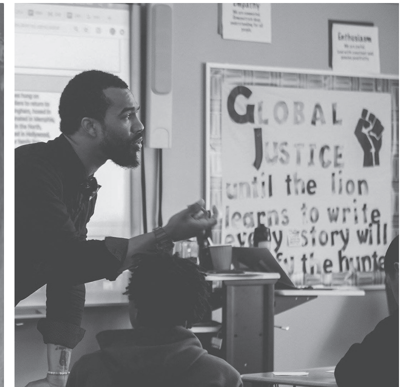
To Be Young, Black, and In the Academy: A Collection of Lessons

by Yetunde Alabede, Jess Reed, and Blake Thompson

Yetunde Alabede

Jess Reed



Blake Thompson

"We Are Each Other's Business"

We are first year doctoral students living out the tensions of being in—but not of—academia. Our differently mapped paths have led us all to the Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education (CITE) program at Michigan State University. Since starting this journey, we have examined *what* we know, questioned *how* we know, and honored *who* we know. As emerging scholars, we are expected to generate knowledge through rigorous educational research that confronts and extends existing literature. However, we reach beyond these expectations by disrupting white supremacist systems while constantly confronting ourselves (Milner, 2007). We ask questions that sit us in front of the mirror: "Who are we, what do we value, and why are we doing this work?"

We share a commitment to Black youth and communities across the African diaspora. As poet Gwendolyn Brooks penned, "We are each other's business. We are each other's magnitude and bond" (Brooks, 1971). We aim to center counter-narratives in "the ongoing struggles against colonialism, racism, and White supremacy among other oppressions" (Baszile, 2015, p. 240; Tyson, 2003, p. 20). We also seek to guide educators in helping youth strategize and (re)imagine their futures (Calabrese Barton et al., 2020). Through it all, we care about congruence between how we and all educators live, work, and build with young people and community knowers.

For admission to our PhD program, we each crafted a "Statement of Purpose" that introduced our professional goals. In this article, we revisit what *purpose* means in the context of our scholarship and real-life teaching practice. First, we illuminate our individual journeys toward and through the program thus far. We then declare our intentions to grow and support each other. We, lastly, connect our personal critical reflections to implications for practitioners' work within themselves and with young people. As lifelong learners, educators, and current doctoral students, it motivates us to invite dedicated teachers into our processing of resonant research and prompts for growth.

Why We Are (Here)

Jess: Discerning the Difference

While growing up in Detroit (Westside!), learning and teaching in out-of-school community contexts was my normal. During the summer before seventh grade, I joined Wayne State University's *Math Corps Program*, which gave me friends, mentors, jokes, and opportunities. Magnetic instructors taught us to not only master fractions and integers but to also venture into advanced

math and imaginary numbers. I was one of hundreds of kids who came back summer after summer, eventually getting my first job there as a Teaching Assistant (TA). As a shy 14-year-old, I was entrusted to help other youth feel seen and academically confident. Winning the Outstanding TA award a year later signaled that I could make an impact. The “Math Corps Way” was legitimately about kindness, support, meaningful reflection, humor, honesty, and belonging. The program was neither subtractive nor just about math. It was family.

At Math Corps, Black women educators taught me that I was worthy. Ms. Martell, a former Program Dean, once told me through tears everything she saw in me. Dr. Borum, previously a student in the program, was the first Black woman I met with a PhD. Now a math professor at Spelman College, she remains a mentor. These women, the other staff, my friends, and mentees showed me that love should be inseparable from learning. They were “existence proofs” of who I could be (Ladson-Billings, 1995). They illuminated that joy and education could belong to each other. I had some great Detroit Public School teachers, but I trace my professional calling and ethics back to Math Corps. As I share this experience, I invite practitioners to consider multiple promptings: What does it mean to be an educator? What if teachers honored youth and community members as knowledge holders and sharers, too? What opportunities can be created to allow youth to teach each other in school settings? Additionally, how might such experiences encourage some youth to become educators and teach in their home communities?

Before starting my PhD, I was the Education Director at a nonprofit just minutes away from my childhood home. During my six years there, I tried to embody what empowered me as a participant in Math Corps. I prioritized relationships and had the freedom to learn alongside predominantly Black youth. We collectively immersed ourselves with engaging, multimodal texts and community storytellers. While reading *Ghost* (Reynolds, 2016), my sixth- and seventh-graders met and chatted with Detroiter Lou Scott, who ran in the 1968 Summer Olympics. The moment was organic as Scott, a retired teacher, routinely exercised at the community center that housed our program. Another special memory was taking students to the Black woman-owned Norwest Art Gallery for a day-long, interactive, and multimodal “Lit Lounge” about Black hair. These moments symbolize opportunities. Literacy practitioners, especially, can render texts more tangible by partnering with local orators and sites of activity. These local partners can, in turn, also converse with students about the texts and stories they enjoy in school and in out-of-school settings.

Activities that flourish outside of school can thus qualify as experiences of education. Since childhood, out-of-school spaces have equipped me to envision possibilities for living, teaching, and learning with Black youth. Before learning the scholarly language, I knew to celebrate “community literacies” (Honeyford & Sanchez, 2021). It has also been affirming to encounter literature about the possibilities of community-based programs. Baldridge et al. (2017) believe that “community-based programs provide space for young people to imagine beyond the borders of neoliberalism, standards-based assessment, and zero tolerance policies” (p. 388). As an adult, I acknowledge these opportunities while also navigating tensions of how out-of-school spaces can help Black and Brown youth disrupt and transform unjust systems if reliant on specific funding structures to persist. Similarly, how can such spaces pursue social justice if the interests of youth must converge with the interests of wealthy, and often white, donors? And finally, since school is routine to youths’ lives, how might teachers emulate some commitments of imaginative community-based programs? Can pedagogical disruptions to neoliberal pressures and assessments spiritually refuel both teachers and students?

Since transitioning to my doctoral program, I have remembered my questions. I intend to approach curriculum, instruction, and teacher education with my vibrant foundation in out-of-school learning spaces. I accept my instructors’ challenges to discern the difference between schooling and education, as the former perpetuates violence and the latter invites resistance and transformation. Texts like *Literacies of Power* (Macedo, 1994) have magnified that “the reading

of the world must precede the reading of the word" (p. 16). Holding literacy in conversation with critical race theory (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2016) and colored epistemologies (Scheurich & Young, 1997) makes me ponder: What all is needed to co-create educational home spaces for Black youth to enact liberatory literacies while unpoliced? How might educators sharpen students' comprehension of oppressions while preserving their joy? What if we also supported their self-fluency in expressing what they imagine and need? Through centering the 'all' of expression (writing, speaking, thinking, feeling, moving, listening, sharing, making, and being), how can we craft joy, resistance, connection, and even African diasporic consciousness? For practitioners teaching, and more profoundly, learning with and from Black students, heeding these questions could disrupt the disrespectful existence of detached educational spaces. Black youth deserve resonant educational communities where they can define wholeness. May they only learn about fragments in sentence structures rather than being forced to become fragments themselves.

Yetunde: Essentializing Me Through Language

Language is a complex and dynamic word (Papi & Hiver, 2020), and its meaning can be found within the context of situation and culture (Halliday, 1993). Yet, one consensus is that language is a communication tool (Rabiah, 2018) that helps people express their thoughts and feelings in society (Halliday, 1993). Language can be written or spoken, but receptive skills (listening and speaking) are essential to developing productive skills (reading and writing). Personally, the role of language cannot be overemphasized in defining where I come from, where I am, and where I am going. Coming from Nigeria, a linguistically diverse country (Akujobi; 2019; Lambu, 2020; Ugwu, 2020), I unconsciously became bilingual and bi-literate from childhood, just like most Nigerian kids. Reflectively, I see my position as a PhD student today because of my bilingual and biliteracy skills, which started at a tender age.

To say that Nigeria's language policy helped my literacy skill is no gainsay. One of the country's primary education objectives is to "inculcate permanent literacy, numeracy, and the ability to communicate effectively" (National Policy on Education, 2008, p. 18). In the same policy, the language of the environment is supposed to be the language of instruction in the first three years of schooling. In the early 1990s, when I started elementary school, this policy was implemented, thereby supporting my ability to read and write in my mother tongue, Yoruba, and later, English. These multiple abilities have propelled my journey, but the path has been difficult. As the foremost Nigerian educationist, Tai Solarin, said, "May your roads be rough." I began and continued my rough road in school, which has brought me many successes. Currently, I am pursuing a doctoral degree in hopes of developing an international curriculum that promotes bi/multilingualism with cognizance of children's agency. My goal is to promote social justice through bi/multilingualism, bi/multiliteracy, and the intercultural competence of young minds in today's globalized world.

Achieving my goals triggered the question, "How do we promote intercultural competence and global citizenship through literacy in our classrooms?" This question's answers depend on the sociopolitical and historical context, which calls educators to consciously incorporate and consider their students' backgrounds when planning literacy lessons at all levels of education. For my exploration, I will contextualize how Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson Billings, 1995) aligns with other language pedagogies like Grammar-Translation, audio-lingual method, and eclecticism. These approaches have supported my literacy skill as a student and a teacher, too (in my little corner). Ladson-Billings (1995) outlined three components of CRP that focus on students' learning and academic success, develop students' cultural competence through positive ethnic and social identities, and support students' consciousness and critique of social inequalities. The Nigeria National Policy on Education, NPE (2004) highlighted the development of a "united, strong and self-reliant nation" as a key objective of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Nigeria seeks to "live in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic and sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality, and justice" (National

Policy on Education, 2008, p. 10). This goal is only achievable with understanding the diverse nature of each child in the classroom. The individual child is the microcosm of the larger society (Krisnanto, Sagala, & Ziliwu, 2020). Therefore, achieving the objective in the child is achieving it in the nation. Hence, I argue that educators and policymakers have a great role to play in understanding their learners' different identities and sociopolitical and historical milieu to foster the development of an inclusive literacy curriculum.

In Nigeria, I taught English language and literature. Because most of my thoughts are processed in my native language, Yoruba, I was able to work with and learn from my students. The hegemony of the English language, along with teachers not taking cognizance of the indigenous languages (Jerome & Voloshina, 2019), has affected students' literacy skills in their mother tongue. This is corroborated by the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) 2009 Report, which states that only 25.99% made five credits and above, including in mathematics and English. In 2010, there was a decline to 23.36% (Usman, 2012). The reason for this circumstance is layered as Sa'ad and Usman (2014), in their survey research, identified complex linguistic situations that tend to students' mother tongues. In my classroom, I adopted a learner-centered approach to understanding my students' backgrounds and their language abilities. This outcome yielded a positive result for my students' exams, and I was awarded "Best Student-Teacher" in 2011.

The award motivated me to prioritize students in my lesson planning. Teaching students to read, write, and use language in the context of culture and situation (Halliday & Hasan, 1985) is advantageous for achieving Nigeria's goal of education and success. As a conscientious teacher who sees myself in my students, I decided to learn another language (Chinese Mandarin). This choice opened doors to work with younger children interested in learning Mandarin as a third language in Nigeria. My mantra is "making my passion, my profession, and my work become play." Committing to understanding Nigerian students' backgrounds made it easier to work with them and their parents in learning Mandarin. I allowed them to "code-mix" and "code-switch" as they developed their literacy in multiple languages. During the 2016-2017 academic session, I launched the "Respecting Other People's Culture Project." Students and I explored Chinese Mandarin, French, and Nigeria's three major languages (Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo). After this project, one of my mentors encouraged me to teach Yoruba language and culture in the United States through the Fulbright Foreign Exchange Program. Placed in North Carolina, I excitedly used learner-centered and CRP to foster engagement in and out of classroom activities in a Historically Black College in North Carolina.

In 2019, I presented a paper on my pedagogical approach at the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages Conference (NCOLCTL). At that time, I did not have the terminology for my teaching method, but my first year in the doctoral program has given me the language to identify my approach as CRP. I simply communicated my passion for centering my students' cultural backgrounds, which, as some scholars argue, is important as it emphasizes the social foundations of education (Warren & Venzant Chambers, 2020). My Fulbright experience led me to where I am today. Sometimes, I question how I started a doctoral journey in the United States as a female from a patriarchal Nigerian society. I know, however, that I am breaking the glass ceiling because of my linguistic essentialism, a gift my parents and Nigerian society gave me.

Blake: "Playing the Game"

It was a Sunday morning during my teaching days, and a former college teammate-turned colleague, Hadi (*pseudonym*), came to kick it in my backyard sanctuary to joke, analyze, theorize, and for lack of a better phrase, "shoot the sh**." He began detailing an exchange with a male student at our school who had been put out of class. Since Hadi—then a pre-service teacher, now a school principal—was observing the class, he explained that he went to have a conversation with the young man, Amir (*pseudonym*), and give some perspective. As a Black man, he had experiences he believed could have been helpful given the situation. I firmly remember my colleague recounting Amir's

verbal defensive: “Maybe I don’t want to fu***** play *that* game.” This was in response to my colleague telling the student, “Sometimes you’ve got to play the game to get what you want.”

“Playing the game” is a concept that my parents drilled into me like, I am sure, was drilled into many other young, Black boys. From the racial ambiguity of my name to the close haircut my father ensured I got every two weeks, I now look back and see these *normal* parts of my childhood as calculated. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) explains this same idea in depth:

> Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made (p. 79).

I believe this obsession is a form of survival to help our young people, like this young man, survive in the *afterlife of slavery* (Hartman, 2008). The afterlife of slavery, “in which Black humanity and human possibility are threatened and disdained” is a notion that parents, educators, and advocates of Black children must endure daily (Dumas and ross, 2016, p. 429). Yet, what do our children lose in our own, our parents, and our folks’ pursuits of protecting their physical and emotional selves? From explicitly “playing the game” with attempts at whitening or neutralizing our appearances through names, dress, speech, or expression, what are our children learning and resisting from how we enact survival in an anti-Black nation? Was Amir explicitly choosing to reject the values that have dominated the lives of both me and Hadi?

Looking back, I wonder if Hadi considered Amir’s own values in his response, or if he considered only the values centered by his teacher, us, or our elders–all steeped in whiteness? It could seem that Amir was a “ray of hope for large systemic change” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 431). It might also seem that Amir was disruptive to the classroom space, thus leading to his premature exit. Though I am unsure of what transpired in the classroom for him to be sent packing, I am sure there is something to learn from his words: “Maybe I don’t want to fu***** play *that* game.” Was his liminal view an asset or a liability as he was able to see “...perspectives of his own while simultaneously grasping the fundamentals of the workings of the dominant class” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 263)?

With birds chirping and lawn mowers mowing, we sat, wondering how our navigation of life has perpetuated the status quo. How did “the game” differ between us, the teacher, and the young man who was not willing to “play that game”? What did that young man hold true to himself that my colleague and I had not? What have we lost or suppressed that our student refused to let go of? Or, what is the game that he was willing to play, that we decided was not the one that we would play? I wonder: in what ways can we, in the academy, engage in research regarding micro-resistance displayed by students?

In my short time as a doctoral student, the concepts of epistemology and ontology continue to rear themselves as I reflect on experiences in the K-12 classroom. My beliefs manifest from “...inside a culture, inside a civilizational social construction, we live in the terms and ways of a particular social history” (Scheurich and Young, 1997, p. 8). The society we live in valorizes the assimilation to whiteness and seeks to erase, marginalize, and ignore the unique epistemic beliefs, traditions, and values of nonwhite peoples. Amir’s actions articulate a struggle between his epistemic beliefs and his teachers’. The actions that led to his dismissal could be deemed as harmful to the classroom space or could be valorized as an example of reclaiming what has been suppressed generationally in the lives of Black people.

I am conflicted. As a teacher, I understand there are actions that may be harmful to the classroom space, norms, or people. Yet, I also know that the structures of traditional classrooms often reject the norms of Black children. Black students are implicitly and explicitly taught to behave in ways palatable to white people in order to navigate spaces throughout an anti-Black country. In other words, Black learners have been taught to soften appearance and actions to appear more

acceptable. But in those actions, what have we suppressed that Amir chose to enact? What lessons must I and educators everywhere learn from Amir about the ways we have been socialized? What lessons must we learn from students like Amir and others who challenge second class integration which "does not consider the traditions and the feelings of Black people" (Siddle Walker, 2018, p. 357)?

As I have contemplated Amir's words in refusing to "play the game," I have realized that we, educators, must redefine the concept of "literacy." For Black children, literacy extends beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic to incorporate the lived experiences of Black people in our continued dreaming of Black Educational Spaces that align with our epistemology and ontologies (Warren & Coles, 2020). Amir and other students who choose to resist school enact a form of conscious resistance that deserves exploration. You can play the game with the cards dealt, or you can play your own game. In what ways are we teaching and learning from our children who occupy space in classrooms in alignment rather than marginalizing them?

Approaching literacy must stretch far beyond the limited ideas of reading, writing, and speaking towards a vision of learning, unlearning, and relearning from students and fellow educators. We, as educators, must also search for the ways educators are already centering, praising, and helping sustain the multiplicitous literacies in which our students are already fluent. We must also be willing to negotiate and collaborate with students to create spaces that allow for the various literacies they bring to the classroom. Furthermore, research must continue to explore the ways educators approach the classroom space epistemologically and ontologically so that we may create more equitable learning spaces for all students.

Threads Between Us

Emdin (2016) stated, "the ways that a teacher teaches can be traced directly back to the way that a teacher has been taught" (p. 206). Throughout our journeys, we have been directly impacted by various educators, including students, mentors, colleagues, and teachers. Through a bevy of learning experiences, we remain committed to disrupting and reimagining educational systems for Black youth. As doctoral students, we may not be able to transform a settler colonial education system en masse, but we are taking confident strides towards chipping away at it. In his acclaimed collection, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Bell (1992) tells a story about a woman, Mrs. MacDonald, who knew that dismantling the system of anti-Blackness in America would be far-fetched. Still, she lived to be defiant within the system of anti-Blackness. Our collective presence on the campus of Michigan State University is rooted in defiance. Our current work is rooted in resistance. The conversations, collaboration, and communication we are seeking is rooted in the uplift of *our* folks, which in an anti-Black empire, is a lesson learned from all of our teachers. As we continue on our collective yet individual paths, where we have been and who we have learned from are our guiding light.

Persisting Forward

Jess

Prior to summer 2020, I never saw myself pursuing a doctoral degree. I am here, though, because there is work to be done, thoughts to sharpen, relationships to embrace, and stories to uplift. As Tyson (2003) stated, "The time for change is now, and the time for educational research to lead such a change is at hand. Academia, on the other hand, is not a place for fermenting a revolution" (p. 26). This university, with its plethora of resources, is a manifestation of whiteness. It complicates my sense-making and rootedness outside the institution. Working with Blake, Yetunde, and others, however, reminds me of the biblical encouragement to "not be weary in well doing." So long as we have each other, we will remember who and why we are here.

Yetunde

Due to Nigeria's language policy, I was taught in my mother tongue during my first three years of schooling. Today though, the English language is prized in Nigeria. Most parents do not speak to their children in their native language, which affects the implementation of the language policy in school (Akinpelu, 2020). Hence, most students are no longer bilingual, let alone

biliterate. I started my doctoral journey to equip myself with curriculum development and implementation strategies that promote mother-tongue and other languages in Nigerian schools. However, this research interest shifted slightly, because in 2021 a white female teacher "complimented" my then 19-month-old toddler by saying she has many "English words." Why couldn't the teacher say instead that she, an emergent bilingual and second-generation immigrant child, "has more words"? For my initial doctoral studies, I will learn more about U.S. language issues and policies and understand how immigrant families use the Family Language Policy (FLP) to develop their children's bi/multilingualism and their survival strategies. I will explore partnerships between parents and teachers that work toward equitable classrooms. I am determined to help educators tap into the diverse linguistic funds of knowledge that children bring to classrooms. Hence, I am advocating that educators should be diligent, open-minded, and conscious of promoting home-school connection, especially in literacy classes.

Blake

As we move forward in our collective and individual journeys, I hope to explore narratives of defiance, love, rejection, and triumph from various perspectives in K-12 classrooms. I firmly believe that scholarship must not work in opposition to the home literacies of children by replacing them with *school* literacies. Rather, they should work in conjunction with one another. Further research must explore the ways in which values of educators, students, and communities collide and co-exist within academic spaces. In our most liberatory fantasies (Dumas & ross, 2016), we must leverage one another's views, experiences, and rawest thoughts to continue the rich tradition of (re)creating space for Black children in classrooms everywhere.

Implications for Practitioners: On Commitments to Self, Youth, and Transformation

Our three stories cannot end with us. We challenge practitioners to enact the wisdom weaved throughout our experiences. In doing so, we underscore the urgency of praxis, "connecting theory and practice in deep and explicit ways" (Brayboy, 2013, p. 96). Here, we outline commitments for educators to embody.

Educators must develop and assert a critical stance, rooted in lifelong reflection and honest conversations with themselves, students, and committed colleagues. Practitioners should ensure and protect intellectual safe spaces where they honor and learn from youth who refuse to conform to whiteness. They should hold high expectations for all students with reverence for community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Educators also need to expand their definitions of literacy to encompass young people's conscious ways of "reading the world" (Macedo, 1994) and crafting unapologetic narratives. To disrupt the Chimera of Whiteness, patriarchy, and capitalism (Montoya et al., 2016) that permeates global and local contexts, practitioners must intentionally promote anti-colonial intercultural competence and global citizenship through critical literacy instruction. Ultimately, to ensure the global citizenship we desire, all voices must be heard through conscious literacy expression both within the school building and the community as a whole.

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Author Biographies

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Jess Reed (she/her/hers) is a daughter, sister, friend, storyteller, and ice cream lover from Detroit, Michigan. She is also a PhD student in the Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education program at Michigan State University. She can be reached at <jessicareed115@gmail.com>.

Blake Thompson is currently a doctoral student at Michigan State University in the Curriculum, Instruction and Teacher Education program. His areas of interest lie at the intersections of critical pedagogies regarding race, curriculum and teacher development. He also serves as the Director of Social Studies Curriculum at Collegiate Academies Schools in New Orleans, Louisiana. He can be reached at <thom2188@msu.edu>.

Black and Brown Freedom!

“Black and Brown Freedom” by Zuri Hudson Stanbrough