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Cover Page Footnote

Author's Note: If you are a teacher or administrator and would like to share how you foster spaces that develop and sustain community consciousness, please email me at gosslaky@msu.edu.

Spaces to (Re)imagine Community Consciousness for Students in Detroit

by Lakya Goss

...Why claim Detroit
If you suddenly frame it as a city whose season is its
overdue spring,
An image of a place to grow when you don't truly love
its heart,
Its Blackness that beats with the genius
of people creating:
Sounds of Motown, J Dillas, and Stretch Moneys,
Dancing hustles and daily hustles to pursue dreams,
Gardens and community and laughter on porches,
Spaces to heal and affirm humanity.
Why claim Detroit
if you don't truly love it?

—Detroit Seasons by Jess Reed

“Detroit Seasons,” written by Detroit poet Jess Reed 2017, affirms the heart of the city, its youth. Through changing seasons, Detroiters have found ways to create, affirm, and be joyful in their communities and educational spaces. As a new season inevitably approaches, it is important for educators to maintain spaces where creativity, affirmation, and joy can thrive among students. To create learning spaces that purposefully engage Detroit’s dynamic cultures, histories, and people. These spaces can foster students’ community consciousness, which is both an awareness of different needs and perspectives beyond oneself and a necessary component of civic engagement (Flanagan, 2020). School, as a place to practice the complexities of government and civics, shapes students’ critical perspectives on authority, agency, and citizenship. Community consciousness equips students to participate in a democratic society, one of the purposes of public education (Gadsden et al., 2019). Educators who thoughtfully create spaces that build community consciousness engage with multiple cultural perspectives and expand students’ worldviews by situating curriculum in historical, cultural, and communal contexts. In this article,



Lakya Goss

I suggest that, as literacy educators, we can look to Detroit’s rich history of African-centered schools and homeschooling for inspiration to help students connect with curriculum and sort out a common question: “What does this have to do with me?”

Carving Out Space

Immediately post-enslavement, formerly enslaved Americans actively established educational spaces within their communities to lay the foundation for future generations of civically engaged educators and public schooling for all (Anderson, 1988). As public education evolved, Black educators sought ways to meet the academic and social needs of their students while fostering community consciousness. In the 1990’s, after more than thirty years of political strategizing by community leaders, the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) adopted a district-wide African-centered education program to support the academic, social, cultural, and political development of students by centering their historical and cultural heritages in all areas of the curriculum (Halvorsen, 2012). An African-centered education is concerned with deepening students’ cultural, academic, and social literacies and calls for a readjustment of cultural and communal understanding characterized by an encouraging,

supportive, and understanding environment wherein students are viewed as educable (Lomotey, 1992). An African-centered education is inclusive in its engagement of multiple perspectives alongside, not necessarily in place of, traditional curriculum. Teachers foster community consciousness by enacting an asset-based culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), which positions students' cultural identities as intersecting and fluid in response to the marginalization or silencing of cultures or communities (Paris & Alim, 2017). During the African-centered era in the DPS, educators purposefully decided what to sustain through their curricular and pedagogical choices. Described as "conscious makers" driven to meet the educational needs of students, they developed district-wide curriculum, resources, and professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders.

Prior to the district's official adoption of the program, independently-founded African-centered schools in Detroit like Aisha Shule (est. 1974), the Nsoroma Institute, and Nataki Talibah also engaged in culturally sustaining practices. These schools emphasized positive teacher-student relationships and asset-based curricular choices. Routine school activities included rites of passage ceremonies, performance arts, presentations, and lectures (Chike, 2011). Both teachers and school leaders engaged in practices that sought to nurture the academic and social development of students.

Beginning in the early 1990's, I attended the Detroit Public Schools, and most of my K-12 school experiences were rooted in the district's African-centered program. I acutely remember being challenged yet affirmed. Other former teachers and students also recall being challenged, deepening knowledge of self, and gaining leadership values. For example, Angelica Lindsey-Ali (Figure 1), former teacher at the Nsoroma Institute, remembers feeling challenged yet comforted:

The minute that I got on staff, it felt like a homecoming of some sorts even though I didn't know anybody there. I felt that I could be completely myself. Being a teacher, you were also a student because of who you were working with because

the teachers there were foundational people in the African-centered and political movements in Detroit. Working at Nsoroma brought me a feeling of both comfort and challenge, but it was a good challenge because you couldn't just teach the curriculum, you had to embody it. As teachers we had to be models in self-evaluation which is where the challenge came in. Nsoroma was my real education.



Image 1. Comfort and Challenge (Image used with the permission of Angelica Lindsey-Ali)

Angelica Lindsey-Ali (top left) is a community health activist and former teacher at Nsoroma Institute in Detroit in the 1990s.

Similarly, Shaunda Marie Bunton (Image 2), who taught at Nataki Talibah remembers engaging in acts of introspection:

One of the things that I took away from Nataki that I still carry with me today is meditation. We did it every day at the beginning of the school day. All the teachers went on a retreat to learn how to meditate. Through meditation, I learned the importance of centering yourself, listening to yourself, and honoring that. I saw the difference that it had on staff and students and the level of calmness it brought. It was beautiful.

Shaunda Marie Bunton (center) is a Detroit entrepre-



Image 2. Introspection (Used with the permission of Shaunda Maire Bunton)

neur who taught at Nataki Talibah SchoolHouse in Detroit from 2002-2004.

And, Malia Salaam-Cisse (Image 3), former student, explains:

At the age of 5, I went to the Alexander Crummell School, predecessor to Aishe Shule. Mama Imani Humphrey (founder of Aishe Shule) is like an icon for educational leadership. When I went into teaching and school leadership, I was thinking about Mama Imani, like ‘What would Mama Imani do?’ because she was always out there doing the work. Baba Malik Yakini (founder of Nsoroma Institute) was one of my first teachers. At the time, I thought I was in the most distinguished and prestigious school.

Community members supported school efforts by teaching, providing monetary contributions, and actively participating in school activities. Their involvement reinforced community consciousness by maintaining school-community ties, a key component of an effective African-centered education (Jamison, 2020).

Malia Salaam-Cisse (bottom right student), former teacher and school administrator, is a career center



Image 3. Leadership (Used with the permission of Malia Salaam-Cisse)

manager for returning citizens in underserved communities and attended African-centered schools in Detroit.

Curating Space

Critical thinking, self-reflection, and working to build the world you want to live in are important steps toward developing community consciousness (Flanagan, 2020). During the African-centered education era in Detroit, teachers and students were encouraged to think critically, engage in introspection, and learn from educators who used their voices and did the work while sustaining culture and community. A culturally sustaining pedagogy that intends to provide space for students' voices to be heard (Paris & Alim, 2017) is particularly salient for students in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) where over 80% of enrolled students are Black (DPSCD, 2022) because having the ability to understand and name racialized experiences is a critical survival skill for students of color (Wright, 2021).

Today, the DPSCD no longer has a district-wide African-centered program, and few African-centered schools remain in Detroit. However, cultural responsiveness is a skill that educators anywhere can learn, develop, and sharpen over time (Borck, 2019). Classrooms anywhere can be (re)imagined to foster community consciousness. Teachers can affirm students'

academic and social needs by uplifting and learning from all students' histories and cultures. As a foundation for learning, teachers curate these spaces by carefully selecting, organizing, and presenting information to enhance students' academic, social, and cultural literacies. This space-making empowers students to unearth that which already exists within themselves and their communities (Muhammad, 2020). Learning with students by centering their cultures and communities encourages multiple perspectives, critical thinking, and cross-disciplinary discourse. In these (re)imagined spaces, teachers can tap into students' funds of knowledge as a pedagogical tool, and students are active participants in their own learning to create new knowledge. Funds of knowledge refer to the bodies of knowledge and skills developed through families and communities (González et al., 2005) including attitudes, values, and identity perception. These skills are grounded in the historical, political, economic, and social contexts of households that make up their communities. Funds of knowledge go beyond the surface of what is usually thought of as culture and foregrounds the family practices and cultural resources students possess when they come to school (Moll, 2019). In these spaces, educators also motivate students to draw upon their community cultural wealth to learn with and from students. Community cultural wealth pertains to the knowledge, skills, and abilities that marginalized communities use to survive (Yosso, 2005). A pedagogical commitment to draw on community cultural wealth considers students' lives outside of school, accepts different ways of knowing and learning, and celebrates the community's achievements and resilience. Often unacknowledged in formal educational settings, drawing on community cultural wealth shows care for students and investment in the community. Partnerships with students' families and communities can enrich curricular and social connections while building consciousness and modeling active participation in the community.

Fostering community consciousness in school thus involves centering students through culturally sustaining practices. This centering promotes a sense of belonging, active citizenship, and criticality. School, as

a place of joy, is a (re)imagined space where school and community are tightly braided. School leaders, faculty, and staff intentionally seek to curate an environment in which community consciousness can take root and flourish. (Re)imagining spaces that foster community consciousness calls for mutual respect, collaboration, and engagement. Therefore, students, teachers, and school leaders must take an active part in creating them. In (re) imagined spaces, culturally sustaining practices are non-prescriptive and are adapted to fit students' contextual needs. As shown in Table 1, educators can take pedagogical approaches that seek to foster community consciousness across multiple subjects and contexts.

The cultural, academic, and survival knowledge that students need, including community consciousness, can be accessed in spaces that work to meet their needs (Brayboy, 2013). The pedagogical approaches displayed in Table 1 are examples of ways that educators in public schools can work towards creating and sustaining spaces designed to meet the academic, cultural, and survival needs of all students within existing curriculum.

Sustaining Space

When traditional educational spaces do not meet students' needs, some families seek alternatives. Families and community members continue to take action to transform their children's educational experiences and protect them against systemic inequalities, including the unequal distribution of knowledge that exist in schools (Lofton & Davis, 2015). Alkebu-lan Village and Avalon Village (the latter being located just north of Detroit in Highland Park) are two examples of community-centered learning spaces that work to develop community consciousness outside of traditional public school settings. Their programs utilize community resources and cater to students' academic, cultural, and social well-being. Offerings include tutoring, multimedia training, life-skills, and courses in the arts.

Detroit families also find educational spaces for their children in community-centered homeschool environments. Families participate in homeschool corporations (co-ops) wherein families share resources,

Table 1

Pedagogical approaches to fostering community consciousness

Pedagogical Approach	Explanation
<p>Teachers seek out a variety of texts that center students’ cultural and community ties including their language(s). Students are encouraged to discuss the uses, motivations, and effects of language within their communities.</p>	<p>Baker-Bell (2020) describes language as a tool of empowerment that can foster linguistic positivity among Black students.</p>
<p>Teachers provide opportunities for students to interact with the world by mapping out areas (e.g., local neighborhoods) and learning about the history of the people and land. Families and community members are invited to tell their migration/immigration stories in-person or virtually.</p>	<p>Grade-level skills and meaning-making grounded in culturally sustaining practices can be fostered through collaborative interactions with the world and each other (Wissman, 2021).</p>
<p>Students are given opportunities to see themselves as authors with agency within their communities, and teachers incorporate student voices in the classroom by displaying student-authored stories, poetry, quotes, and other work.</p>	<p>Teachers can better connect with students when they understand who they are as individuals and within their communities (Gibbs Grey & Jones Stanbrough, 2019).</p>
<p>Students are exposed to texts that center historical and contemporary figures and events from multiple perspectives. Teachers pair curriculum requirements with supplemental materials to put them in conversation with each other and critique curriculum by asking students critical questions about author perspective and position, socio-political motives, bias, etc.</p>	<p>Any kind of text can be a basis for analysis through discussions, critique, and debate, even in a prescribed curriculum (Ervin, 2021).</p>
<p>Students are provided with resources and tools to debate issues that are relevant to their cultures and communities. By debating, they develop important skills such as argument formation, effective listening, and idea interrogation.</p>	<p>Debate actively weaves home, school, and community and strengthens the academic performance through multiple literacies within and outside of school (Jones Stanbrough, 2018).</p>
<p>Teachers use nonfiction mentor texts written by people of color, including local authors. Students individually and collectively participate in writing self-authored informational books. Books are culturally relevant across type and genre.</p>	<p>Connecting known and new knowledge helps students make cultural and community connections in informational text, which makes room for new ideas, including low frequency words encountered in informational text (Kganetso, 2016).</p> <p>Writing techniques such as word choice and details that are taught with culturally relevant books can be used to teach craft moves (i.e., the choices authors make) and engage readers (Braden & Gibson, 2021).</p>

expertise, and cultural knowledge (Dennison et al., 2020). Families draw on community resources including private tutors, elective and extracurricular opportunities, and social groups (Mazama, 2016). According to a U.S. Census Bureau survey, homeschooling rates are increasing across racial and ethnic groups. Black families are now the largest growing homeschool group in the United States, increasing from 3% in the spring of 2020 to 16% in the fall. Across all racial groups in the state of Michigan, the homeschooling rate jumped from 5% in the spring of 2020 to 11% in the fall, while the Detroit-Warren-Dearborn MSA (Metro statistical area) went from 3% to 15% within the same timeframe (Eggleston & Fields, 2021). There are nuanced and contextualized reasons for choosing to homeschool, but some families are concerned about school safety, a culture of low expectations, and a one-sided version of history that makes it difficult for Black children to get what they need from school (Lundy & Mazama, 2014). Some families attribute their choice to the freedom to prioritize Black perspectives in a safe, affirming environment with high academic and behavioral expectations (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013).

Families also seek out alternatives in an effort to educate the whole child and ensure their intellectual, artistic, emotional, spiritual, and social needs are met (Mazama, 2016). In community-centered learning spaces, students can make curriculum connections they are unable to make at traditional schools since families are able to tap into their children's individual life experiences and make deep personal connections to content—a privilege that teachers do not always possess. Fortunately, for the majority of Detroit families with students enrolled in traditional public schools, community consciousness can still be fostered through pedagogical approaches and commitments that work to create spaces where students are affirmed.

Final Considerations

The pandemic has forced many of us to voluntarily or involuntarily (re)imagine spaces, and educational spaces are no exception. The educational spaces that we create for students in Detroit are critical for their survival and

sustainment. Literacy teachers and administrators in these spaces who actively foster community consciousness respond to students' needs through intentional pedagogical and curricular decision-making. To be clear, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to literacy teaching and learning. African-centered education and community-centered learning spaces are two examples of Detroit educators cultivating and nurturing community consciousness. As we enter Detroit's next season, it is vital for loving hands to carve out, curate, and sustain spaces that protect the heart of the city and what we truly love about it.

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“Homeschool Happiness” by Zuri Hudson Stanbrough