

Teaching in a Culture of Love: An Open Dialogue About African American Student Learning

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Abstract

Building relationships between teachers, school administrators, parents, and students is an ongoing process, and the core component of such relationships is teaching and learning. There is much to learn about developing supportive relationships that encourage today's diverse students and their parents in the U.S. However, there is an ongoing argument that few schools adequately equip preservice and in-service teachers with the necessary tools to prepare students to function in today's literate and global societies. For instance, some teachers mirror the dominant culture, which often follows a White savior mentality of seeking to "save" students who are considered less fortunate, or they subscribe to a deficit view model that perceives stereotypical biases and creates low expectations of students of color. In this article, we introduce the term "teaching in a culture of love" to debunk these models and instead seek to value diverse students and families' lives both within and outside school communities. Situated in Yosso's community cultural wealth framework, this work brings an awareness of the cultural capital that Black and Brown students already employ to leverage and improve their experiences in schools around the use of technology and literacy. This article combines community cultural wealth with recommendations for educators concerning (a) culturally appropriate pedagogical practices, (b) diverse and global literature for student development and engagement, and (c) digital literacy practices that create cultural relationships for 21st century learners.

Key Words: diverse students, teacher education, diversity, literacy, reading, digital literacies, African American students, teaching, culture of love

Introduction

“I speak to the Black experience, but I am always talking about the human condition—about what we can endure, dream, fail at, and survive.”

—Maya Angelou

In today’s social climate, many teachers ponder how to genuinely embrace Black students in their classrooms. Though teachers speak about students as people they *should* love, one often wonders: “What’s love got to do with it?” Additionally, teacher educators work with teachers to expose them to the Black experience, but, in reality, what do these teachers do with that knowledge? Do they recognize and value these culturally specific experiences?

In this discussion, we focus on personhood as it relates to the ethics of caring (Noddings, 1992) and to one’s abilities to understand the human condition and *how* to care. One of our goals is to create a sense of community within the school by helping teachers better understand how to move beyond caring into a culture of love by creating a sense of community for students and their families. Based on Bourdieu’s (1986) work around different forms of capital—specifically economic, social, and cultural capital—and Yosso’s (2005) community culture wealth framework, this work demonstrates how the notion of love draws on the rich resources of Black students as its true capital.¹

According to Yosso’s (2005) definition of the community cultural wealth framework, which draws on the knowledge students of color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom, students possess six forms of capital: aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, social, and resistant. As Yosso (2005) explains, these forms of capital are not “mutually exclusive or static”; instead, they are “dynamic processes that build on one another” (p. 77). This work brings an awareness of the cultural capital that Black and Brown students already employ to leverage and improve their experiences in schools. In a hierarchical society like the United States, the knowledge and culture of the upper/middle class are often valued above others. According to Coleman (1988), and later illustrated in research by Caldas and Cornigans (2015), parents play a role in fostering the cognitive and social development of their children. This development is enhanced by the funds of social capital used to prepare their children to interact more seamlessly and productively among other middle-class, like-minded social worlds of schooling. Moreover, knowledge and culture are passed from generation to generation and could be a

leading reason why inequalities are reproduced over time. In this sense, schools are vital, because teachers can teach students about valued forms of knowledge and culture beyond what they have been taught elsewhere and, in so doing, reduce inequality.

We define the “culture of love” as a school culture that seeks to encourage both school personnel and families to take advantage of the resources found in the lives of students and families in the community. This approach can occur by utilizing the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005), which is grounded in the knowledge, skills, and abilities found in each community. In this article, we discuss how teachers and other school staff can use the framework to explore aspects of community cultural wealth and bring an awareness to the cultural capital that African American students already possess as a means to empower them from a strengths-based perspective, rather than a deficit view, and thus strengthen their school communities.

In 2015, Black students in U.S. public schools made up 16% of the student body in elementary and middle schools; by 2026, they are expected to comprise 15% (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Yet an overwhelming 84% of teachers are White women (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015), while only 7% are Black teachers of any gender (5% females; 2% males; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). These demographic gaps raise concerns, not because these teachers are bad instructors, but because, for Black students in urban settings specifically, learning is different, and students benefit from collaborative learning (Emdin, 2016, 2017). For instance, one of the underlying tenets of multicultural education is that all students benefit from information about individuals with related economic, racial, and cultural backgrounds (Manning & Baruth, 2004). In discussions with teachers about their preparation, Villegas and Irvine (2010) found that many teachers lack specific knowledge of African American students who live in urban communities. Many teachers think they understand but may, in fact, misunderstand the social, psychological, and cultural differences that these students possess and bring to their classrooms (Michie, 2007; Neely, 2003). This lack of understanding consistently undermines the efforts of White teachers in many classrooms to adequately enter into a loving collaboration that prepares Black students for the future.

This discussion is organized around two key questions and a framework for how to respond to them. As former classroom teachers of Black students and other students of color and as current literacy researchers and teacher educators of predominantly White female teacher candidates, we asked the following questions: What is the road to successful Black educational instruction through an awareness of “White” cultural practices? How can we help practicing teachers and teacher candidates embrace the “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti,

Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that students bring into the classroom and move those teachers to broadening their theoretical perspectives for “culturally relevant teaching” (Gay, 1995), “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and “culturally sustaining practices” (Paris, 2012)? In an effort to challenge teacher consciousness, we ask, “Whose culture has value?” (Yosso, 2005).

We question how the desire to achieve academic success in elementary and middle school settings often shifts the debate to a deficit perspective around family involvement, a lack of support, and economic concerns, as teachers struggle with getting to know students of color and finding ways to reach them. These inquiries are important when considering ways to improve African American children’s literacy outcomes, inform practices and programs, enrich academic research, and transform policy (Lewis Ellison, 2017; Smagorinsky, Guay, Lewis Ellison, & Willis, in press). Furthermore, we want to avoid the “shame blame” perspective (which marginalizes the poor; Howard, 2016) and the “White savior industrial complex” (the White person who acts to help non-White people from a presumed position of complete privilege; Cole, 2012)—both of which White teachers encounter when entering these types of inquiries. Kirkland (2010) and Ladson-Billings (2006) argue that, in measuring the outcomes of Eurocentric curricula, instruction, and assessment, we erroneously measure all students by the same cultural perspective. Thus, it is imperative that educators address and learn to recognize the instructional, familial, and social needs of African American students in order to reduce the educational gap between Black and White students.

Critical, Cultural, and Capital Lens in Teaching

Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education is framed by the study of power and oppression, and it draws from multiple disciplines, including law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women’s studies, to examine issues around schooling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Among the vast issues addressed by CRT are deficit perspectives, Eurocentric curricula, limited resources, and standardized testing (Berchini, 2016). Yosso (2005) explains that, as a framework, CRT “can be used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact school structures, practices, and discourse” (p. 70). According to Solorzano and Yosso (2002), critical race theorists speak to the ways schools at all levels contradictorily oppress and marginalize people of color, even in the midst of potentially liberative and transformational pedagogies. Historically, African Americans—particularly Black males—have had volatile relationships with education and schooling. Indeed, there is a lineage of deficit-view approaches in education, such as the prevention of slaves from

learning to read and write and consistent stereotypical biases and assumptions from teachers, administrators, faculty, and policymakers about Black students as underperformers in academic grades and test scores (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015; College Board, 1999; Lewis Ellison, 2017; Meiners, 2015; Williams, 2005).

CRT offers a practical and relevant lens for teachers to analyze and interpret the counterstories of students of color in their classrooms. A major tenet of CRT centers on the experiences of the marginalized and oppressed (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). These counterstories are spaces for resistance and reframed thinking by addressing dominant ideologies that fail to acknowledge systemic realities routinely faced by people of color. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) define counterstory as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)” (p. 32). These counterstories are also often corrective in their challenges to resist adherence to “majoritarian” White perspectives. Counterstories are comprised of voices that speak to and validate life circumstances. Similarly, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) point to these stories as a form of “psychic preservation” (p. 57) to counter the demoralization of Black people.

Frameworks such as *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Au & Jordan, 1981; Ladson-Billings, 1995) call for an affirmation of cultural experiences, identity, and relevance for students. *Culturally relevant teaching* is defined as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2010, p. 31). It explores how students are empowered academically, socially, emotionally, and politically. Finally, *culturally sustaining practices* (Paris, 2012) capitalize on the sustainment of a “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 93). However, as educators of Black students, we argue that a reality-based pedagogy, which brings what is happening outside the classroom into the classroom (Emdin, 2016), needs to be addressed. We have personally observed too often how White teachers embrace these community cultural wealth frameworks and address true student achievement within this population, but many have reduced them to checklists rather than strategies to understand, teach, and embrace students’ cultures, learning needs, experiences, and languages (Goldenberg, 2014). It is important for teachers to listen to the narrative accounts given by Black members from the community (e.g., the stories students write or orally share). Indeed, it is through listening to the stories, increasing awareness for reading and sharing stories, and using digital tools (i.e., iPads, e-textbooks, digital stories) that teachers are able to capture counternarratives of

student success (Beach, 2012; Dooley, Lewis Ellison, & Welch, 2016). Thus, we argue for teachers to develop an awareness to reshape teaching and open dialogues about the kinds of literature and practices needed for African American students' educational advancement (Bean-Folkes, 2012, 2015; Haddix, 2017).

We consider Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital as pivotal in the explanation for Black students' success. Cultural capital examines the "unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes" by "relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits [which] children [from] different classes and class fractions can obtain [in the] academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 47).

Research has demonstrated how parents provide cultural capital to their children, which can lead to their educational achievement and success (Dumais, 2002; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Martin & Spenner, 2009; Smagorinsky et al., in press). According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital refers to an accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed and inherited by privileged groups in society. Bourdieu asserts that cultural capital (i.e., education, language), social capital (i.e., social networks, connections), and economic capital (i.e., money, other material possessions) can be acquired in two ways: from one's family, and/or through formal schooling (Yan, 1999). The dominant groups within society are able to maintain power because of their access to strategies for social mobility (Yosso, 2005). However, the traditional perspective of cultural capital is too narrowly defined towards White, middle class values—hence, we turn to Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, which employs the six aforementioned alternative forms of capital. This framework is relevant because it helps us understand and map lived experiences in the narratives of students. It is also important in helping teachers focus on the educational and cultural needs of students. For instance, as Yosso (2005) argues:

the knowledge of the upper and middle classes is considered valuable to a hierarchical society. If one is not born into a family whose knowledge is already deemed valuable, one could then access the knowledge of the middle and upper class and the potential for social mobility through formal schooling....The assumption follows that People of Color "lack" the social and cultural capital required for social mobility. As a result, schools most often work from this assumption in structuring ways to help "disadvantaged" students whose race and class background has left them lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities, and cultural capital. (p. 70)

Yosso's community cultural wealth framework shifts the lens away from a deficit view of communities of color "as places full of cultural poverty and other disadvantages, and focuses instead on the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p. 69).

The community cultural wealth framework is comprised of six forms of capital, which Yosso purposefully distances from dominant and economic barometers of capital, merit, and value in order to give the often-missed intrinsic and communal merits of communities of color precedence and privilege (Yosso, 2005). The first form is "aspirational capital," or "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). The second form is "linguistic capital," which refers to "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). "Familial capital" relates to the knowledge that is produced and nurtured through kinship that extends beyond traditional notions of what "family" means, accounting for historical and communal bonds with others (Yosso, 2005). The fourth form is "social capital," which refers to "networks of people and community resources" that exist to help communities of color navigate social systems (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). "Navigational capital" is a cultural form that represents the possession of skills and knowledge to strategically move through systems and structures neither originally designed nor intended for people of color (Yosso, 2005). The last form is "resistant capital," which relates to the increasing competence and skills that are accessed and enacted through persistent stances against the systemic inequality experienced by people of color (Yosso, 2005).

Other scholars (Farmer-Hinton, Lewis, Patton, & Rivers, 2013) have also found community cultural wealth appropriate because of its capacity to provide space for us to name racism as a key determining factor that continues to influence the policies and processes that negatively affect schooling in communities across the country. Yosso's (2005) framework is useful in addressing inequitable schooling in classrooms with students of color as part of a larger dominant script that promotes a cultural difference that blames those students for the educational inequities they face, rather than acknowledging racial disparities. For example, Hilgendorf (2012) noted that increased understanding and influences of notions of family, the roles of families, and the relationship between familial race/ethnicity and socioeconomic class has implications for how teachers prepare to teach. The community cultural wealth framework is valuable because it allows teachers to engage in acts of agency and self-empowerment to bring their students' stories to the center, to resist dominant and deficit ideologies, to insert perspectives that defend and give voice to the students in their

classrooms, and to tap into the cultural wealth students attained through their schooling (Yosso, 2005). Teachers who become knowledgeable of the framework can potentially deprogram biases that arise from the variance in their lived experiences in order to include the students' funds of knowledge, culturally relevant practices, and culturally sustaining practices into the classroom.

Reframing Teacher Perspectives

Based on our work in teacher education classrooms, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework was used to create a possible outline for teachers to use in Grades 3–8 to approach literacy with a digitally accessible population of students in formal or informal classroom settings (as outlined in Table 1 near the end of the article). Also, in the framework, we illustrate how teachers might bring students' aspirational, social, and familial capital into the classroom to ensure that all students feel they are loved and a part of the community.

Using Diverse and Global Literature to Engage and Motivate

Teacher and student selection of relevant and compelling literature that is full of rich language allows students to experience a variety of communication styles as well as ways of living and communicating in the world (Berchini, 2017; Emdin, 2016). Research suggests that White teachers' engagement with Black students' linguistic and social culture can be a significant factor in their academic success (Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, & Garrison-Wade, 2008).

The sociocultural perspective of literacy is viewed as a set of practices that comprise specific ways of using language and interacting with people (Street & Street, 1995). African American students benefit from opportunities to make choices about how they learn, especially concerning the type of literature they read. It is important for students to see characters like themselves, and to read about places and people from their own cultural backgrounds and perspectives. The gap which divides White teachers and Black students is influenced by powerful social conditioning that cultivates negative attitudes towards Black students; researchers (Douglas et al., 2008; Emdin, 2016; Howard, 2016) have argued that many White teachers work from within a hegemonic, Western epistemological framework. Therefore, this often predisposes them to have lower expectations of Black students and a lack of respect for the students' familial capital and primary social capital (Ogbu, 2003). Oftentimes, students experience schooling as skills-based and Eurocentric, which can lead to a lack of motivation for learning (McCombs, n.d.).

One way that educators might engage students in the classroom is to investigate diverse, multicultural, and international literature that resembles their

communities. Establishing the habit of reviewing websites or blogs such as “We Need Diverse Books” (<https://diversebooks.org/>) to expand one’s knowledge of diverse and multinational literature is an excellent way to start. Another tactic is the consideration of establishing dialogue in one’s school community about transparent (Akhavan, 2008), explicit literacy instruction. This approach may help to increase teachers’ knowledge and literacy strategies for readers who struggle with reading. In addition, motivating students with texts that enable them to see and hear the familial, aspirational, navigational, and resistance capital in the literature shared in the classroom shows students that they are valued. In general, the use and selection of relevant literature gives students the opportunity to have their voices heard.

Using Digital Literacies to Create Cultural Relationships

Pedagogical approaches used to engage today’s students must include digital literacies and culture. Digital literacies involve “multiple and interactive practices, mediated by technological tools [that imply] reading, writing, language, and exchanging information in online environments” (Lewis, 2013, p. 1). For African American students moving beyond pen, paper, paint, and clay to digital tools (e.g., iPads, cell phones, video games), this provides a more contemporary way for them to create meaningful practices, exert agency, and construct identities that will dismantle the cultural-deficit representations that have been revealed in previous research (Lewis Ellison, 2014b; Lewis Ellison, 2017). Embedding culture from students’ home/community-based literacy practices (e.g., digital storytelling, spoken word poetry, hip-hop) as a welcome addition into school-based literacies can reduce marginalization in school contexts (Alim, 2011; Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012; Lewis Ellison, 2017; Petrone, 2013; Vasudevan et al., 2010). Examining the connection of digital literacies with culture among African American students is significant when thinking about new approaches and paradigms for pedagogy in the 21st century (Lewis Ellison, 2017; Smagorinsky et al., in press).

While many may focus on the digital divide or claims of disproportionate numbers of low-income Black students and their access to digital tools, Tisha’s work examines the digital literacy practices of low- to middle-income African American families that debunks this myth and has focused less on deficit perspectives and more on investigating what these populations do with the digital literacies and tools in their everyday lives (Lewis, 2011, 2013, 2014a; Lewis Ellison & Solomon, in press; Lewis Ellison & Wang, 2018). In addition, entities such as the Pew Research Center (Smith, 2014) report a high rate of technology/digital use at home and broadband adoption across technology (e.g., cell phones) and social platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) among

African American youth and their families. Thus, it is imperative to recognize the already existing digital literacy practices that African American students consume and produce in the home; it is also relevant that teachers consider how these home literacy practices can and should be incorporated into the classroom (Lewis Ellison, 2017).

To speak to the culture of love as a means of engaging students, we suggest ways in which teachers can build different types of capital to support African American students' learning with digital tools. Scholars have spoken to the ways culture and digital tools/media need to be included in today's pedagogy as a means for social justice through empowerment and dialogue (Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, & Lopez, 2013); for agency, apprenticeship, and affinity (Lewis, 2014a, 2014b; Lewis Ellison & Wang, 2018); and for transforming learning in urban schools (Mahiri, 2011). For example, Yosso's (2005) framework illustrates how literacies, cultures, and learning for African American students help "capture the talents, strengths, and experiences that students of color bring with them" (as cited in Murphy, Redding, & Troyman, 2016, p. 190). We consider these to be capital, coupled with multimodal literacy practices and strategies, to provide ways that teachers can interact collaboratively and collectively with their students of color to engage them in learning (see Table 1).

Final Reflection

Table 1 highlights Yosso's framework alongside literacy and outlines the types of learning that might occur in classrooms that work in loving, collaborative ways. It also aims to illustrate how teachers of students of color might abandon deficit views. Our goal is to help teachers rethink their teaching so that, instead of Black–White gaps in learning, teachers can experience learning in ways that are culturally appropriate and create concrete strategies that benefit students of color. We have provided a small sampling of tasks in Table 1 designed to encourage teachers to expand upon these forms of capital in their classrooms to enhance pedagogy for students of color.

Table 1. Yosso's Framework and Literacy Practices/Strategies

CCW Framework	Definitions	Digital Practices/Strategies	Broader Impact
Aspirational Capital	Hopes and dreams students have	Allow students to use camera phones to take photos of five or more artifacts/locations (in and outside their communities) that they hope to accomplish or visit (e.g., career, home, academic, etc.) within a school semester/year. Students will download their photos to use for online journaling (i.e., Google docs; Penzu).	Some students are not challenged to dream or aspire for fear of disappointment or lack of resources. This visual practice will allow students to become agentive creators of what they envision their future to entail. Such activities during early years may provide greater success.
Linguistic Capital	Linguistic and communicative practices students bring into the classroom	Accepting students' varying forms of language and communicative styles by signifying their identifications via written texts, images, and music (e.g., participating in a Twitter chat; creating a blog; establishing a podcast; see https://studentvoicepractitioners.com/).	This activity teaches students that their home and community discourses are valid and valued in schools, communities, and societies. Students can capitalize on multimodal practices to acknowledge their linguistic and communicative capital to be accepted.
Familial Capital	Acknowledging familial resources (stories, wisdom, beliefs) students draw from home	Allow students to plan/develop a digital story activity at school. Students will create questions and interview family members about their narratives. Students and family members can collectively create a digital story and present to family members and peers.	When students understand their cultures from their family genealogy and can utilize digital tools to capture their family's narratives, they learn about themselves and also learn how to work together with family members to extend family dynamics in the home.
Social Capital	Student and peer social contacts and networks	Create a Facebook/Twitter group for students. Allow them to engage with peers about curricula, respond to group members about a reading, etc.	Students may already engage in this practice; however, when teachers create these opportunities to engage in connected learning, it makes learning student-centered.
Navigational Capital	Structures for students to navigate in education/community	Have students develop and create websites or blogs on social justice issues (e.g., navigating police within your community; creating ways to discuss racism in curricula).	Students need to know how to use digital tools to navigate society. By allowing students to digitally voice their views and create choice about social justice issues, it creates a sense of shared classroom community.
Resistance Capital	Securing equal rights/collective freedom	Create videos on ways to collectively create a diverse democracy and post on social networking sites and use for class assignments.	Providing support to students to create autonomy by creating videos about issues that affect them will allow them to resist and/or sustain their democracy.

Note. CCW = community cultural wealth

Truthfully, all teachers have biases. However, recognizing them enables us to be more understanding of the learning needs of African American students and, as educators, we are committed to the goal of creating a sense of community within schools. As Dewey's (1897) well-known quote states, "Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not preparation for life, but is life itself" (p. 77). These words resonate with us because we understand the importance of educating ourselves about our students beyond the classroom and into the community. In addition, we agree with recent scholars (Emdin, 2016; Haddix, 2017; Milner, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016) who actively engage with diverse students and hone in to their voices and agencies both within and outside the classroom. Like us, these scholars also work with White preservice and in-service teachers and suggest other implications for how specific educational tools should be used for diverse students. Emdin (2016), for instance, states that teachers can follow the realities of youth experiences by having "co-generative dialogues" (conversations with students outside of school) to engage with students about their learning and the teachers' instruction in an effort to revise the plan of action for future instruction (Emdin, 2017). In this way, teachers invite students to participate with them in the process of creating pedagogy, and teachers' listening to their input makes a culturally responsive and sustaining classroom. This kind of teacher is more concerned with the student as a learner and a member of today's global societies than merely fulfilling pre-set educational standards. Indeed, a truly effective teacher understands and genuinely values what students bring to the classroom and works to supply them with their educational needs for school and beyond. In light of the current social climate, to teach in a true culture of love calls for a renewed sense of urgency for teacher educators/practitioners to become more informed about and better support our rapidly expanding, diverse population of students.

Endnotes

¹It is important to point out Yosso's (2005) critique of Bourdieu's work; that is, Yosso argues that many interpretations of Bourdieu assume that diverse populations lack the necessary capital to be successful.

²The terms "African American" and "Black" are used interchangeably.

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