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Cross-Cultural Mentoring: What Education Needs Now

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In 1965, the United States (U.S.) experienced considerable social, political, and economic change. March of 1965 marked the arrival of U.S. combat troops in Vietnam, an event which is largely considered the start of the Vietnam War. Mere weeks after this deployment of troops, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. led thousands in peaceful protest in Selma, Alabama and demonstrated against racial and civil injustice. Later that year, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, helping to ensure that African Americans had the same rights and access to voting privileges as Whites. Meanwhile, the U.S. was still competing with the Soviet Union in the Space Race, while strategically navigating against the Soviets and their many satellite states in the Cold War.

Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that in April of 1965, Jackie DeShannon recorded one of the most controversial and political soul ballads ever written:

What the world needs now is love, sweet love.
It's the only thing that there's just too little of.
What the world needs now is love, sweet love.
No not just for some but for everyone.

Written by Hal David and composed by the legendary Burt Bacharach, “What the World Needs Now is Love” was a song meant to inspire peace, understanding, and love during a time fraught with violence, bigotry, hatred, and war (Richards, 2009). Ultimately, the Vietnam War ended with the fall of Saigon in 1975, but not before tens of thousands of Americans, Vietnamese, and other soldiers lost their lives. The Civil Rights Movement continued until King was assassinated in 1968, marking this period of bloodshed with another tragic, needless death in the face of violent oppression. In many ways, an incredible outpouring of love, typified by David’s and Bacharach’s song, was absolutely necessary during a period of such civil unrest and social upheaval.

There are clear parallels between 1965 and 2019. In 2019, the United States is still involved in a nearly twenty-year conflict in the Middle East, stemming from the attacks on 9/11 perpetrated by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda. In the years of U.S. occupation in the Middle East, thousands have lost their lives, akin to the countless casualties of the Vietnam War. African Americans have continued to be murdered in cold blood, some by police, and names like Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Baker, and Eric Garner have become as synonymous with the fight against racial discrimination as Reverend King himself. Meanwhile, debate over the U.S. southern border has been wracked with xenophobia and isolationism—reminiscent of the Cold War and Red Scare of the 1960s—as the U.S. President has insisted upon anti-immigration and anti-inclusionary policies meant to uphold the racial and economic stratification still present in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Decades removed from the Civil Rights Movement, in today’s society, U.S. education is still struggling to uphold the values that Reverend King died defending. Many transgender students still protest for their rights to use school restrooms inclusive of their gender identity. State legislators still erase socially and culturally responsive curricular materials from K-12 classrooms. Wealthy enclaves

still redraw district lines to minoritize and exclude low-income communities from quality, well-resourced schools. Students of Color still feel unsafe on college campuses where young people should feel free to learn and grow. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

In education, societal contexts are often compared with education systems, as schools reflect culture. Today's school children eventually become tomorrow's leaders. If the United States is socially and politically conflicted, the United States education system is equally so. Affirmative action policies have continued to be attacked in courts of law, and student debt is at an all-time high, forcing many recent college graduates into difficult repayment plans and out of the housing market. President Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program is hanging in the balance, while dozens of parents face criminal charges and jail time for facilitating bribes to purchase college admission for their children. Teachers continue to leave the profession across the P-12 spectrum, while racially motivated hate crimes continue to be perpetrated on college campuses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

What the U.S. education system—and the United States writ large—needs is love but asking for an education system of millions to immediately embrace love and empathy toward others is a task that could take lifetimes. Moreover, what would an embrace of love and empathy look like across an entire system? Is the impetus on educational leaders to provide more opportunities for teachers, students, and other educational stakeholders to develop meaningful relationships that extend beyond the classroom and into the community? Is the impetus on educational policymakers and lawmakers to provide schools with the funding necessary so that students' basic educational needs are met, possibly rendering relationships easier to establish and maintain with teachers, staff, and educational leaders? Or is the impetus on individuals within the system—one teacher in one classroom or one student with another—to make concerted efforts to give and receive love and practice empathetic behaviors so that we may learn lessons beyond the schoolhouse walls?

I believe what U.S. education needs now is individual willingness to be open to new people, new cultures, and new relationships. What U.S. education needs now is a large-scale embrace of growth mindsets, and for individuals to acknowledge that they can learn from those who are different from them. What the U.S. education system needs now is cross-cultural mentoring, with mentors and mentees from different backgrounds coming together on common issues like inclusion, equity, peace, and love.

This critical forum of the *Texas Education Review* features five scholarly perspectives from individuals who believe in the power of cross-cultural mentoring to change education for good. In "Homeless Liaisons as Natural Mentors," doctoral student Desiree Viramontes Le powerfully articulates the plight of homeless youth pursuing educational opportunities. Viramontes Le details how homeless liaisons, as they mentor youth across a considerable socioeconomic gap, fundamentally change and save the lives of children, providing them with a better, brighter future through education. Similarly, Drs. Caroline Turner and Stephanie Waterman chronicle the importance of cross-cultural mentoring in academe in "Pushing Back Against Deficit Narratives: Mentoring as Scholars of Color." As scholars of color continue to be underrepresented at all levels of education in the United States, Drs. Turner and Waterman provide an incredibly timely piece about the fundamentals of mentoring, eloquently stating that "The best mentoring experiences do not have to be same-race or same-gender. What is important is caring and listening."

Next, an academic powerhouse in the field of mentoring in higher education, Dr. Richard Reddick, and colleague Dr. Katie Pritchett contribute “‘With the Richness of Their Resources’: Alumni of an Honors Program Reflecting on the Impact of Service-Learning and Mentoring.” In this piece, Drs. Reddick and Pritchett brilliantly focus on how alumni of an honors program—who enjoy a special position of privilege in higher education—leverage their privilege to participate in service learning and mentoring opportunities that effectively give back to a community that provided so much to the alumni themselves. In another piece, doctoral candidate Jessica Fry and one of her mentors, Dr. Julie Schell, speak to the importance of self-exploration within one’s educational journey. Through personal stories, the authors reflect on the importance of finding a sense of belonging in educational settings. In addition, they discuss the ways in which a pedagogy of belonging can help create cross-cultural bridges between faculty mentors and doctoral students. Finally, I share a two-year abridged autoethnographic account of my mentoring relationship with the aforementioned Dr. Richard Reddick. I have learned much over the past three years about cross-cultural mentoring, the importance of listening and learning, and how different people can come together to find so much common ground and compassion.

Ultimately, I hope for this critical forum to accomplish two goals. One, I believe that this critical issue demonstrates that cross-cultural mentoring can be an effective practice for bringing diverse people closer together. However, and perhaps more importantly, I also wish that reading these articles may inspire someone to seek a reciprocal relationship with someone with whom they do not share a dominant identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, spoken language, dis/ability, or another. In a time of many crises in United States education, cross-cultural mentoring may be what education needs now.

Z.W. TAYLOR, M.A., M.S., is a PhD candidate at The University of Texas at Austin. His research interests include linguistics in higher education, particularly pre-college information addressing first-generation college students and English-language learners. His work has been published by the *Community College Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *Journal of College Student Development*, and *Teachers College Record*, among others.

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