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“Back to Basics:” Converging Mattering, Dialogue, and Love within Pedagogy, Research, and Community-Engaged Work

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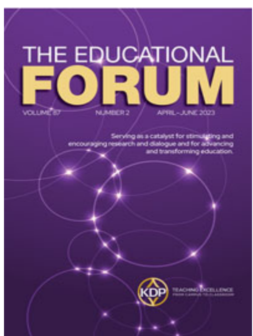

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ESSAY

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"Back to Basics:" Converging Mattering, Dialogue, and Love within Pedagogy, Research, and Community-Engaged Work

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the intersections of Mattering, Dialogue, and Love—three seemingly distinct concepts, within schooling and research. Using sister circles, book presentations, and a critical ethnography, we underscore how a critical examination of one's lived experiences can serve as a platform for anti-racist and social justice work. In this way, this article functions as a medium through which we acknowledge systemic inequities perpetuated within schools and recenter schools as extensions of the communities they serve.

KEYWORDS

Mattering; dialogue; love; intersectionality; qualitative methods; community-engaged research; critical pedagogy; teacher education; curriculum; communities of color; critical consciousness

We first presented this paper at a conference that prompted us to reconsider the possibilities that education for liberation engenders within schools and communities. As a Black woman educator of Caribbean descent, Camilla's research and teaching centers the embodied ethics and pedagogies of liberation of Black women, explores the possibilities family, school, and community partnerships foster for historically marginalized youth, and draws upon qualitative inquiry to imagine new ways of wrestling with old issues. Tapping into cultural and communal understandings to disrupt static conceptualizations of what constitutes teaching, along with who has the right to teach, she is most interested in how Black women's epistemologies shape and transform spaces and places of teaching and learning. In many ways, Camilla's engagement with Black women who work within and beyond school contexts is what drew her to the call to "reconsider the possibilities education for liberation engenders within schools and communities."

As a first-generation Xicano student, Martín is the youngest of seven, yet the first to go to college in his family—an experience that greatly shapes his interests in conducting research that exposes and eliminates structural barriers that impede Students of Color as a whole, and specifically Latinx students from succeeding academically. In his research and teaching, he utilizes collaborative methods, Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and concepts such as community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) to debunk Latinx students' perceptions of their own "educational deficits," and to embrace perceived "shortcomings" as assets toward their education. Thus, his scholarship and mission highlights asset-based explanations for Latinx student success in K-12 and higher education to inspire hope and change.

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Terrance, a Black man from the rural US South, finds his research intricately interwoven with his own educational experiences. Such experiences were born from his myriad identities as a Black boy (to man), a Black geoscientist, a Black teacher, and a Black teacher educator. In many ways, he found STEM learning to be a place of intellectual violence, where Blackness was synonymous with *Otherness*. Thus, his collaborative ethnographic research centers Black youth's multiple identities as pedagogy in reshaping equitable science curricula. Through this work, he partners with schools to support elementary teachers in leveraging socioscientific issues to teach science to enact local change.

Despite having different research foci, what brought us together was a commitment to being in community with and working alongside those whom we care deeply about. Our collective and nuanced understanding of intersectionality—stemming from our own experiences as Black and Brown people navigating myriad systems of oppression—urged us to take a (w)holistic approach when working with historically marginalized Communities of Color (Patterson & Gray, 2019). Specifically, we acknowledge the various ways in which race, sexuality, class, gender, and other identity markers render the experiences of those with whom we work multidimensional (Crenshaw, 1989). As such, we contend that these intersections necessitate an intentional and collaborative approach to education research.

After several conversations, we identified overlapping themes embedded within the objectives of our research and community-engaged work. During this process, *Mattering*, *Dialogue*, and *Love* emerged as constructs that connected our work and served as the basis that we drew upon to write this paper. As Scholars of Color, we unpack our understandings of these constructs through vignettes, which illustrate the many intersections and manifestations of *Mattering, Dialogue,* and *Love* throughout our work. Engaging these constructs vis-á-vis intersectionality enables us to challenge the interlocking systems of oppression that inherently dehumanize those whom we care for deeply. In doing so, our aim is to magnify how *Mattering*, *Dialogue*, and *Love* are not merely abstract concepts, but tangible mechanisms by which historically marginalized peoples are humanized.

Review of Related Literature

Mattering

We work from the premise that in order to enact meaningful change within schools and communities, one must believe that the people *with* and *for* whom they work *matter*. If people and policies do not reflect this position, then how can we expect Youth of Color and their communities to thrive? Needless to say, mattering is complex and has been theorized by many scholars within and outside of the field of education. While mattering has been conceptualized as the perception that we are a significant part of the world around us (Elliot et al., 2004) or how others perceive us (Marshall, 2001), we recognize that these conceptualizations have limitations as they do not acknowledge race, nor do they account for structures of power.

To this point, Love and Muhammad (2020) insist that peoples' humanity remain at the center of mattering. They argued that the humanity of Children of Color is readily questioned and denied through the perpetuation of whiteness *via* the very institutional personnel and policies charged with educating and protecting them. This is evidenced by del Carmen Salazar (2013) who recounts instances throughout her educational experiences where her Spanish

language, Mexican culture, familia, and ways of knowing were stifled by "systematic practices in the U.S. educational system" (p. 21).

To better understand the severity of renouncing one's humanity, Cacho (2012) provides an argument for why marginalized communities are readily devalued and rendered "ineligible for personhood" (p. 6). More specifically, Cacho (2012) introduces the notion of "social death," which "not only defines who does not matter, [but] also makes mattering meaningful" (p. 6). Furthering this notion, Carey (2019, 2020) underscores what mattering looks like specifically for Black boys and young men, challenging us to broaden our understanding of what it means to matter for *all* Children of Color amidst "neoliberal reforms that dominate schools in urban communities" (Carey, 2019, p. 372). In particular, he argued that there are three forms of mattering: *marginal mattering,* which is realized through societal and educational practices that criminalize, dismiss, and propels Black boys and young men into school and social failure; *partial mattering,* which signals the valuation of some of their skills and abilities and those which leave racist systems unchallenged; and *comprehensive mattering,* which is enacted through the activation of Afropessimism and Afrofuturism. Although marginal and partial perspectives of mattering prevail across school settings, Carey implores us to humanize Black boys and young men within schools through his notion of comprehensive mattering. Comprehensive mattering "focuses on multiple, not singular, ways they matter, are significant, and are essential in society and within their schools" (Carey, 2019, p. 383), thus operationalizing intersectionality.

Consequently, this allows young Black men and boys to imagine educational opportunities for themselves that directly challenge institutions that uphold white supremacy. This requires teachers and other adults to view them and their experiences as significant and essential to the educational success of *everyone*. Further, through comprehensive mattering, family-school partnerships become central, as the boys' experiences are centered and treated as pedagogical resources rather than intellectual liabilities. For the reasons stated above, it is imperative that the concept of mattering be taken seriously and activated when conversing with and working alongside Communities of Color.

Dialogue

We believe that dialogue awakens inquiry. It can be a multi-layered, complex form of communication between an individual and themselves or an individual and others. Comprising written, oral, diagrammatic stories, etc., dialogue is more than just a conversation. It involves listening (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; Love & Muhammad, 2020) while also acknowledging the structures of power (Delpit, 1988), which may inform the nature of the dialogue. When grounded in historical, social, and political contexts (Love & Muhammad, 2020), dialogue can build on and/or challenge past understandings of complex issues. Thus, engaging multiple voices and experiences affords opportunities for people to tackle contemporary issues in more nuanced ways.

Furthermore, dialogue allows for the sharing of one's life experiences, enabling individuals to co-construct memories, experiences, and knowledge. However, embedded within this co-construction is a choice. We can either choose to embrace the resulting discomfort that comes from being vulnerable and reflexive throughout the dialogic process, *or* we can reject the possibilities that emerge from critically engaging with one another about *who* and *how* we

are in the world. Moreover, dialogue can engender both reconciliation as well as revelations about one's self and others. Building on Freire's (2018) work, Kohli (2012) argued that critical dialogue can help oppressed people develop a critical consciousness as well as a space for people to think about how their lived experiences fit into larger structures of oppression like white supremacy, racism, colonialism, sexism, ableism, patriarchy, and so on.

In these ways, dialogue functions as a platform whereby marginalized people can reflect on their own experiences to critically analyze and name systems of oppression. As such, dialogue serves as a form of disruption—whether you accept the invitation to dig deep or choose to remain at the surface.

Love

In reflecting on our own understanding of love, we recall witnessing and experiencing how love was/is enacted within and beyond our respective communities. Through the humor and stories our mothers shared with us, family members—real or fictive—who demonstrated consistency, care and concern, and faith, we came to know varying embodiments of love. After all, bell hooks (2001) reminds us that "There is no better place to learn the art of loving than in community" (p. 129). Because of this, we intentionally positioned love at the root of our praxis and soon realized that there is an intricate relationship between *Mattering*, *Dialogue*, and *Love*.

In spite of this, when trying to reconcile our lived experiences with the expectations at the center of our qualitative research courses, we found ourselves at an impasse. In graduate school, our research training did not encourage nor build in room for us to be in community with people who were part of our research projects. Therefore, rather than pursue traditional research and community-engaged work, we deliberately "[chose] to witness, engage, and labor for the people who we admire[d] and respect[ed], and [...] treat[ed] them with the regard and reverence that we would extend to our own kin" (Laura, 2013, p. 291). This approach has enabled us to establish meaningful connections as well as co-construct knowledge with the communities we serve that extends beyond the traditional researcher-participant relationship (Davis, 2021). Thus, our passion for doing work that contributes to our communities is wholly ignited and sustained by love.

Methodologies of Resistance

Although our individual work occurs in different places and spaces, our experiences and observations attest to how *Mattering, Dialogue,* and *Love* can complement one another in ways that are not typically put in conversation with the other. We are also conscious of the nuances that make our respective projects distinct. Given this, the theoretical frameworks we drew upon as well as the methodologies we employed to critically engage Communities and Youth of Color differ.

In Vignette 1, Camilla provides a glimpse into a sister circle facilitated after conducting semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 14 Black women who work within and beyond school contexts. Using the tenets of Black Feminism and Womanism to guide the discourse, it was essential to center themes specifically related to the historical and contemporary labor

and political will of Black women. In so doing, what came to the fore was an ethic of care and love that not only fuels their current desire to struggle toward education as the practice of freedom, but also exemplifies a powerful interconnectedness between their individual work and that of others. When put together, the work of Linda, Reba aka Dr. Hodge, and Octavia is a collective call to resist methods and frameworks—pedagogical and otherwise—that magnify the perceived lack while intentionally minimizing the work of Black women *actively* meeting the need.

In Vignette 2, Martín uses critical pedagogy to facilitate critical discussions with Oxnard youth, which challenge deficit-oriented perceptions and rhetoric about Oxnard, California, and the many people who call Oxnard home. Drawing on critical race theory's insistence to validate and bring to the forefront experiential knowledge (Solorzano, 1997), Martín uses his book presentations to urge Oxnard students to critically reflect on their experiences and observations, and then challenges them to question the explanations they have been provided about their successes and failures. In having conversations about the importance of experiential knowledge and knowledge production through storytelling, Martín prompts Oxnard students to resist the misleading, taken-for-granted notion that they are unworthy and incapable of producing knowledge.

Terrance, in Vignette 3, employs a conceptual framework that centers the multiple identities (i.e. racial, academic, and disciplinary) of Black and Brown students in the science classroom. Such centering challenges the often damage-centered "colorblind" science curricula that typically usurps the authenticity of socially just science teaching and learning. Through this conceptual framing, he is able to uplift the myriad manifestations of student voice in ways that directly challenge and resist the deficit-laden narratives of Black youth and their interest in school. While love inspires our drive to work with our communities, mattering serves as the ideology that motivates our dialogues within them. Consequently, the three vignettes below magnify the intersections between these constructs and how they have manifested within our work.

Vignettes

Camilla (Vignette 1)

> Why do we need each other? In other words, why do I need Reba? And Linda, why do you need Octavia? And Octavia, why do you need me? Why do you think you need each other?

We had all come full circle. Reba, from the South Bronx. Linda, from Harlem. Me, from Brooklyn. And Octavia, from Syracuse. And even though we were from different generations, and tapped into lived experiences as similar and as different as the color purple is to violet, what drew us together were our ties to Syracuse—our connections to place. How place continuously shaped our understanding of self, especially in relationship to others, was central to each conversation we had. Thus, it only seemed fitting to make "Full Circle" the theme for this sister circle. It was here that I invited each Black woman to acknowledge the presence of the other beside her and reflect on why we needed each other to do meaningful work for our community and more specifically, for the most vulnerable members within it: Black youth. Grounding our dialogue with a question about why we need each other to do freedom and

justice work was a demonstration of how the concept of mattering can become the basis for bringing Black women together and filling the space with their stories, and lived experiences—a rarity within academic settings sustained by Whiteness and sexism.

And while the questions above were undoubtedly inspired by Reba, Linda, and Octavia's life stories, my inclination to anchor our conversation in an ethic of care stems from my own relationship with my sisters—all of whom were among my very first teachers. Lessons about sharing and holding space, exercising vulnerability, and recognizing the power of our voices preceded classroom instruction. I would argue that these life lessons were a profound demonstration of their love for me. Because of this, I came to understand my need for counsel and guidance beyond the school setting as I navigated systems not engineered for my survival (Lorde, 2000). Because of this, I soon learned about the spaces designed to discredit, devalue, and disrespect my personhood—all systems they too had navigated before—all systems, which still persist. Thus, as I prepared to dialogue with Reba, Linda, and Octavia, I purposefully framed each question to prompt discussion around how our work intersects with one another's, and how *who* we are as racialized, gendered, sexualized, classed, dis/abled people, informs *what* we do and *why* we do it.

In fact, the possibilities engendered when we recognize how the work of others informs our own was captured in each response. An excerpt from Reba's response can be found below:

> So I think when we ask the question why we need each other—Black women…I think it's just this kind of recognition that we can't do it all—by ourselves…When I think about why I need other women, that's it. Like, some of those shared lived experiences and the ability to inspire and motivate each other when it gets really difficult. 'Cuz we know what[…]it feels like, you know?

A Vice Principal for an elementary school, Reba, aka Dr. Hodge, draws upon her own educational trajectory to inform both her leadership style and teaching philosophy. Born in St. Thomas, but raised in the South Bronx, Dr. Hodge's herstory underscores the challenges of migration, displacement, and familial resiliency. A former administrator, Linda has since retired and now uses her skills to promote reproductive justice for Communities of Color. Born and raised in Harlem, which historically functioned as a cultural hub for artistic and literary genius, Linda experienced what Nikki Giovanni describes: "Black love [as] Black wealth." Student Assistance Counselor at a local high school, Octavia (re)members her own experiences growing up in Syracuse, New York. (Re)membering enables her to empathize with and support students navigating challenging academic and social contexts (Dillard, 2012).

Despite the fact that Linda, Reba, and Octavia were meeting for the very first time at this sister circle, what we soon learned was that we were *all* working with Black youth and their families within and beyond the school setting to realize a more concrete relationship between education and freedom. An education that opens windows and doors rather than bolts them shut—an education I remember experiencing when my teachers in school looked, sounded, and loved like my teachers at home. And yet, something happened when our sister circle ended that I will never forget. Linda, the eldest among us, looked at each of us tenderly and said that although she just met us, she had love in her heart for us. After an intense, yet fulfilling sister circle, the love expressed was felt deeply.

And so, I join with Hill and Callier, and acknowledge the spirit of Hill L. Waters (2019) to declare that "Because of my community, I learned education should be emancipatory, culturally relevant, artistic, kinesthetic, accessible, and communal" (pg. 540). What we *know* is that

education as the practice of freedom happens best in community. Not within a vacuum and certainly not without the labor and political will of Black women whose lived experiences navigating interlocking systems of oppression inspire life lessons on how to resist, disrupt, and of course—love.

Martín (Vignette 2)

You spoke purely out of experiences.

I was raised in Oxnard, California, a predominantly Latinx community, where pursuing a graduate degree is incredibly exceptional. Some students go straight to 4-year universities, while a majority go the community college route. During the first couple years of my doctoral studies, numerous schools in Oxnard invited me to speak to students and teachers/staff about my educational success. Many Oxnard schools used every opportunity to tokenize me. Schools, and more specifically white teachers, invited me to reinstill their false notions of the "American Dream." Very few, if at all, knew what I studied or even cared to ask. What they didn't know was that my main mission was to challenge systems of oppression and to debunk the notion that we live in a meritocratic society. They simply knew I was in pursuit of a doctoral degree, so they wanted to showcase me as "evidence" that if I made it out, so can others.

Still, I visited classrooms under the assumption that I would speak about the "American Dream" in order to explicitly name systems of oppression like racism, white supremacy, sexism, classism, and so on that prevented People of Color like my family from *siguiendo adelante*. My visits to classrooms—across all grade levels—in Oxnard proved to me the importance of dialogue and how it can serve as a vehicle to empower and raise critical consciousness. All my classroom visits were grounded in dialogue. While I utilize a slideshow with reference points for our discussions, I constantly ask questions and put forth discussion points about students' identities, realities, experiences, and observations to ensure they are recognized and validated. I remind them that they are experts in their own right. That they, too, should have a say in how they want society to be. As a result, they too recognize that they are holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002). I validate and build on their experiences by sharing my own and explain to them my coming to understand how racism, sexism, classism, and other -isms have negatively impacted my own family. During conversations with students, I admit that my journey of empowerment has been a long one and that I had once internalized all the negativity that was said about me and my community.

As part of my visits, I focus extensively on my various identities—my low-income status, being a Xicano, being a first-generation student, being a native Spanish speaker, coming from a mixed-status family, etc.—and how such identities are impacted by systems of oppression. For example, I intentionally include and spend a good amount of time on a slide that has a photoshopped city sign that reads, "Oxnard: 15 Miles of Beautiful Brown People." After telling students that the sign only exists in my imagination and that it is completely made up, they often tell me that they want to make it a reality by installing it in our city. This sign gives rise to very important conversations about identity, mattering, and empowerment. Specifically, by conversing about this sign, I am able to use my identity of being Brown to challenge white supremacist narratives about myself and my Brown community (Gonzalez, 2022). To be clear,

a mixture of dialogue and experiential knowledge has allowed me to connect with students in a way that has been transformational. My conversations are grounded in love, and I explicitly tell students how much I care for them and how much I believe in them, even though our city has a bad reputation. Students have told me that after my visits, they can see themselves doing more in life. In reflecting on my presence in his classroom, a high school student admitted how impactful my presence was because "[I] spoke purely out of experiences." A critical examination of my own identities and experiences coupled with love and dialogue has become an important tool to dialogue with Oxnard youth to facilitate their empowerment.

Terrance (Vignette 3)

Having discovered an interest in geology during my undergraduate tenure at a large, historically and Predominantly White Institution (PWI), I endured years of feeling frustrated and invisible as the only Black person within my cohort. I found myself mostly frustrated with my K-12 schooling experiences. Questions like: "Why have I never learned this before?" and "Why do my White colleagues have this insider knowledge?" occupied a permanent space in my mind. These questions evoked memories of my introduction to geology. It was the first semester of ninth grade and the teacher clearly displayed her indifference for our learning from behind her desk at the front of the room. Each day, we received stapled worksheets and were instructed to sit quietly and use our textbooks to fill in the blanks embedded throughout the pages. For me, this was science learning. I distinctly remember being treated as though I knew nothing and that it was wrong to question the teacher or their motives for my learning. In other words, I remember being treated as though I did not matter. Students from my school and district knew we were not expected to pursue any post-secondary educational endeavors and these feelings were reified throughout my undergraduate tenure. In both spaces, I was conditioned to sit quietly and absorb the teacher's knowledge because this was *the* way to learn science, revealing the unfortunate intersection of learning and failing to matter. Juxtaposed with my experiences are those of John, a fifth-grader.

> He probably won't go to college.

Quietly seated at the rear of the classroom, John, a Black boy, places his head on his desk. He was just reprimanded for "loudly speaking out of turn" during the day's science lesson. Appearing frustrated, he withdraws from his peers and begins sketching in his science notebook. In his notebook, John draws his interpretation of an aquatic ecosystem food web. He provides names of organisms and accompanying arrows to show the various trophic levels of the consumers within the system. This notebook entry is never shared with his teacher nor his groupmates, despite its accuracy and alignment with the lesson's goals. While the students were at lunch, his teacher, a White woman, shared with me that John likely won't go to college as he "doesn't have the skills" and is "assertive in science to make up for what he lacks in other subject areas." Hearing this, I have several conversations with John to learn more about his interests. Through dialogue, John shares with me that he wants to become an engineer when he grows up because he loves science and knows a lot about the subject. His love for science became clearer during a separate conversation where we talked about his notebook drawings from the day he "spoke out of turn:"

Mr. B.: So how do you think this lesson allowed you to show your science skills?

John: Because I kind of knew everything about the animals. I read the flash cards…and everything.

Mr. B.: So how did it make you feel that you knew everything?

John: I felt pretty great because I went home and taught my…um…my dad something.

Mr. B.: And what did your dad think?

John: (excitedly) He said that it was good!

While these experiences happened a number of years apart, the message is the same—the intersection of our identities as Black males with an interest in science indoctrinated us into the many lessons of terrible educations (Hill et al., 2019). Although John and I were at pivotal moments in our educational journeys, we were reminded that we did not matter through the policing of our behavior, which was more important than engaging our ideas. Having navigated this space knowing the harm teachers inflict when they ignore students because of their social location within an already violent discipline fuels my love for collaborators like John. This love engenders meaningful and humanizing dialogue where stories such as these are uplifted and celebrated rather than dismissed.

Discussion

Taken together, our vignettes showcase how our distinct experiences working with Communities and Youth of Color are informed by our keen understandings of the intersections of *Mattering*, *Dialogue*, and *Love*. Through the recollection of memories, connections to place, and the recognition of knowledge within and out of school settings, our work overlaps to challenge the various systems of oppression that inherently dehumanize and decenter those whom we care for deeply. In so doing, we underscore the inherent strengths within Communities of Color and magnify how those strengths contribute to their empowerment.

In Vignette 1, we observe how intergenerational dialogue among Black women fosters critical consciousness and promotes education as the practice of freedom for Black youth within and beyond school contexts. Through storytelling, Vignette 2 illustrates how one's identities, observations, and experiential knowledge are used to initiate conversations with Latinx youth. Doing so empowers them to recognize that they are knowledge producers. In Vignette 3, student-centered dialogue is incorporated to highlight how the historical, racialized, exclusionary, and coded nature of schooling inhibits Black boys from envisioning themselves as scientists.

We share our work not only to reflect on the important roles *Mattering*, *Dialogue*, and *Love* play in our praxes, but to also emphasize the necessity of reevaluating what constitutes "best practices" when engaging with Communities and Youth of Color. We argue that these three constructs cannot materialize if there is no deep investment in place. Acknowledging place is integral to better understanding the unique experiences of those with whom we work. For example, Martín relies upon his own experiences growing up in Oxnard and asks questions about a local restaurant, swap meet, and their area codes to initiate conversations with youth. In this way, he is a "homegrown" educator who employs "pedagogies of the home" (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Reyes McGovern, 2019).

Further, centering place during conversations serves as a foundation for meaningful connections with students. These conversations about place remind us that schools do not operate on an island. To demonstrate, in Vignette 3, John uses his notion of place to create a symbiotic relationship between the school and the community, disrupting the historical separation between the two. Although his knowledge was neither elicited nor affirmed by his teacher, John took what he was learning in school, home to educate his father, akin to the STEM community pedagogy, thus (Tan & Calabrese Barton, 2018), effectively illustrating his deep investment in his own education despite his teacher's deficit-based positioning.

When considering the connective tissue that binds our work, we found that our experiences ran parallel to those with whom we collaborated. Although we have similar experiences, this does not negate the fact that there are unique, subtle differences that must be acknowledged. Therefore, it is essential to recognize how one's positionality and relationship to place has a profound impact on how they engage with Communities and Youth of Color. However, shared experiences or physical characteristics should not be and are not the only factors which bind us. We argue that researchers and teachers alike can facilitate more authentic relationships by exercising active listening and being conscious of the context with which they work, teach, live, and learn.

The above point challenges us to critically examine the purpose of and expectations embedded within research projects, and more specifically, research methods courses. In particular, doing community-engaged work requires people to not only have good *intentions*, but to be very *intentional* about how they partner or collaborate with others as well. This creates opportunities for and builds in room to co-construct shared understandings of particular concepts and lived experiences. And so, because we profoundly believe that the lives of People of Color matter *comprehensively* (Carey, 2019), we have intentionally designed projects and pursued research that aims to disrupt and dismantle systems of oppression that implicitly *and* explicitly dehumanize our communities. Through these actions, we directly respond to Davis (2021) call for research that "goes beyond the study of minoritized persons' lived experiences toward validating their epistemologies, literacies, and languages in ways that embody their liberation" (p. 116).

Undeniably, this approach informs our teaching philosophies and pedagogical decisions. Furthermore, we believe that this work implicates teacher education and challenges us to rethink what comprises teaching and the production of knowledge. Thus, failure to take into consideration the importance of *Mattering*, *Dialogue*, and *Love* when engaging with Communities and Youth of Color upholds the "educational inequalities [that] students [are] subjected to in a highly racialized, violent, and repressive social order" (Johnson, 2017, p. 49). After all, how can we expect educators to enact humanizing practices if they willfully disregard the capabilities, talents, and assets inherent in those with whom they work? Like teacher educator Dr. Marcelle Haddix (2015), we echo the need for

> […] teacher education to evolve beyond the teaching of strategies and methods for implementation in a school vacuum toward a process for beginning teachers' critical interrogation of their social locations and the ways in which they engage with and honor their students' lives and histories (p. 64).

For evolution to occur, teachers—both preservice and in-service—must see students' lives and histories as assets and fundamental to enhancing instruction and removing barriers that inhibit the process of engaging students (w)holistically (Patterson & Gray, 2019). Although we understand and remain cognizant of the curricular limitations in place, we argue that we

should also be critical of them. For example, as we think about curriculum across disciplines that whitewash or sanitize the real life experiences of Communities and Youth of Color, we are reminded that "content" knowledge is often privileged over the rich knowledge produced by members of historically marginalized communities (Souto-Manning & Stillman, 2020). While canonical knowledge may allow for one to navigate educational spaces as they currently exist, it should not supplant one's cultural and community-based knowledge. Rather, it should function as a supplement to these funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and serve as a tool to enact local change (Morales-Doyle & Frausto, 2021).

Conclusion

Reiterating our central point, we work from the premise that in order to enact real change within schools and communities, one must believe that the people with whom they work matter. This requires thoughtful dialogue, and demonstrations of love that are grounded in humanizing practices (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). Conversely, if people and policies do not reflect this position, then how can we expect Youth of Color and their communities to thrive? While our own social locations and disciplinary foci vary, what remains the same is our commitment to serve those with whom we work. This commitment is informed by a foundation that encompasses *Mattering, Dialogue, and Love*. By empowering and centering the lived experiences and voices of our communities, we seek to reimagine what constitutes qualitative research, the production of knowledge, and pedagogical practices—thus rendering our work interdisciplinary and in conversation with the other. That said, we urge educators, researchers, and others invested in community-based partnerships to *believe* in the power of Mattering, *enact* practices grounded in Love, and *build* critical consciousness through Dialogue.

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