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# *Pedagogy of Respect: The Inter-Generational Influence of Black Women*

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## *Abstract*

*There is a large corpus of literature that not only speaks to the nature and qualities of Black women teachers, but that further disrupts the way these educators have been historically located at the margins of 'education,' by highlighting their political and culturally relevant/responsive approaches (Ladson-Billings, 1992/1994/2000; Gay, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1997/1999/2002; Irvine, 1989/1990/2003; Irvine & Hill, 1990; Collins, 2000; Siddle Walker, 1996/2005; Dixson, 2002/2005; Dingus, 2003, among others). This work, that looks at the larger political movement of Black women teachers, comes at a time when researchers are beginning to better blur the traditional boundaries that defined 'center' and 'margin' for educators. In this piece Fasching-Varner presents vignettes that describe the pedagogy of Black female teachers whom educated him, showing how they each have embodied various aspects of **Respect** as has been (re)defined by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000/2001), and how that pedagogy informed his own work with students, particularly African American and Latino/a students.*

## Introduction

There is a growing corpus of research (Ladson-Billings, 1992/1994/2000; Gay, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1997/1999/2002; Irvine, 1989/1990/2003; Irvine & Hill, 1990; Collins, 2000; Siddle Walker, 1996/2005; Dixson, 2002/2005; Dingus, 2003, among others) by Black women educators that 'looks' at the efficacy, political motivations, and the qualities of Black women and their pedagogy. Not only is this work angled toward seeing and describing the unique experience(s) of Black women educators, but has become fundamentally important in (re)conceptualizing a more inclusive 'center' for educators that recognizes effective pedagogy. This work then has created a space to help educators better understand the deep epistemological underpinnings that Black female educators bring to bear on the profession and on their students' lives.

As a White male committed to urban education, my experiences have been deeply shaped by the pedagogy of the Black women teachers who taught me when I was an elementary school student. My experiences as a teacher span a career as an elementary bi-lingual Special Education teacher, as a secondary Spanish teacher working primarily with students of color (African American and Latino/a) in the Rochester New York area, and now, for the past two years as a doctoral student, college instructor and adjunct professor at two midwestern universities in the same city. In this paper, I will provide several narrative vignettes that help to conceptualize the pedagogy of Black women educators in terms of what I describe as a pedagogy of Respect (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000). It is my hope that not only will these narrative vignettes pay tribute to these educators, by highlighting the ways in which their respect- steeped pedagogy spread beyond their students and informed my own pedagogy, but also may serve as a continued call for scholars to locate,

highlight, celebrate, and document the accounts of Black women educators.

In this piece, I hope to contribute to the literature on Black women teachers by discussing those teachers who have been influential in my life. These teachers are themselves part of this larger educational and political tradition aligned with what is understood about the pedagogy of Black women educators. The work of locating Black women's pedagogy as an epistemologically centered political endeavor has been researched and conceptualized in a variety of ways including Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and/or Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2000).

To achieve these goals, I use a narrative style to write about my own memories of childhood and young adulthood as a student of many Black women educators. As a student I would not have used constructs such as political, culturally relevant, or culturally responsive to describe these women, in part because I did not possess such a theoretical toolkit to describe what it was that they did with and for us as their students. Theoretical toolkit aside, I recognized even then, that these teachers' pedagogy as special.

## Approach

I use stories about the teachers to show what was significant about their pedagogy and to highlight how their pedagogical practices are consistent with how others have researched Black women's pedagogy. In particular, I intend for these narratives to demonstrate how the teachers' pedagogical practices influenced me as an elementary and high school teacher who worked with African American and Latino/a students in Rochester, NY. The call for papers in this special issue states "the voices of African Americans are at best, rarely heard in teacher education and best practices literature, and thus, commonly marginalized in larger

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conversations of improving the academic performance of African American and other children of color.” Therefore, the approach of this article hopes to allow not only insights into my experiences with these particular teachers, but also to show how the effect of being a student in these teachers classes spread to my own practice, and toward the larger aim of making less marginalized the conversations of “improving the academic performance of African American and other children of color.”

In many cases, I am writing from experiences of my childhood. I hope to shed light on the larger conversation about pedagogy that can best be used with African American and other students of color in a way that has not been particularly explored before, namely how as a Pre-K student my future practice as a White male teacher working primarily with students of color was shaped by a respect-based pedagogy that the teachers engaged in. The goal, in other words, is to capture the “essence” of my experiences with these women, as the experiences helped shape my own pedagogy. In capturing the “essence,” these vignettes hope to engage in a “...probing, layered, and interpretive...” vista that speaks to “qualities of character” stepped in respect as I know it to be in my experiences with these women (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997, p. 4). Finally, it is my hope that this paper, along with all the other scholarship and research that locates its focus on Black women educators, addresses hooks’ (1984) concern that “...there are so few images of intellectual women who are non-white,” and consequently so few images of sound pedagogy that is effective for students of color” (p. 114).

### Respect—A Frame(Work)

Respect is a word that is used by various educators, often describing its presence, or more often its absence, in asymmetrical power relationships, such as those of teacher/student, administrator/teacher, and school board/administrator. It is concerning, however, that while respect, or lack of respect, is often used as a construct to describe relationships, its use and meaning is often left ambiguous. In the following vignettes, I will explicate the way my understanding of respect is informed.

I use Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (2000/2001), components of respect as defining characteristics of respect to help undergird my use of respect in this article. Lawrence-Lightfoot’s work is supported by other work preceding hers, such as work from Behar (1996) whose focus is on witnessing, Jacobs (1995) who examines respect in a ‘moral’ world, Kant (1782) who Lawrence-Lightfoot believes must always be in the background of respect, as well as from work coming after her’s like that of Siddle Walker & Snarey (2004), Siddle Walker (2005), and Duncan (2004), amongst others, whom all look at race and education with underpinnings of respect. In fact many have written about respect, but it is Lawrence-Lightfoot’s combination of empowerment, dialogue, curiosity, self-respect, attention, and healing that best

provide a frame(work) for the use of the word respect, keeping in mind of course the contributions of those who informed Lawrence-Lightfoot and those who have kept respect going after Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (2000) *Respect*. The multi-faceted approach to defining respect, that Lawrence-Lightfoot uses helps me to understand the importance and weight of respect as a construct, and thus encourages me to be judicious not only in my use of the word, but in selecting those whom, for me, are illustrative of these qualities of respect. It is with great care, therefore, that I use components of Lawrence-Lightfoot’s notion of respect to locate my experience with Black women educators, all of whom **always** use/d respect as a means to create symmetrical relationships between themselves and students, despite the seemingly asymmetrical relationship that is often assumed to exist between student and teacher.

In the following vignettes three of the of the components of respect (dialogue, attention, and self respect), will be explored along side a narrative of one of the Black women educators who I feel has most embodied this particular quality. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2001) suggests that “respectful relationships also have a way of sustaining and replicating themselves...” and that her interest is in “...how respect grows, the dynamic interactions that create and sustain respect” (p.10). For this reason, at the end of each of vignette I will also present the connection or link to how my practice was informed by each particular educator and her embodiment of respect, as it is important in understanding that the respect given to me was crucial to informing my own practice. I will conclude by briefly discussing “respect as healing” as a means to locate all of my experiences with Black women educators as part of the larger movement that works to describe the political and empowering pedagogy of Black women educators. It is important to note that in each vignette, I am choosing to present and bind the experiences I have had with these women as those most salient in my memory.

#### *Respect as dialogue ... Ms. Sarah Gibson*

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000/2001) has framed dialogue as a means of demonstrating respect by engaging in communication that is authentic. In a speech given to the Coalition of Essential Schools, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2001) described respectful dialogue as both listening and responding “supportively.”

Sarah Gibson was a tall woman with short curly hair, for some reason the image of her face has stuck longest with me some 20 years after having her as a teacher back in 1985-1986. I did not get to know Ms. Gibson until the third week of school. I remember it was the third week of school because it was still September and the calendar in my original room still had the ‘apple motif’ signifying September, and very soon after the switch, I remember ‘pumpkins’ being the motif on Ms. Gibson’s calendar. At 6 years old I was unaware as to why we were moved, but was intrigued at having a new setting, new classmates, and most importantly a

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new teacher. Now, as an educator I understand 20 and 30 day shifts in classes based on student enrollment, and I am sure that this led to a re-balancing of the students in the first grade, but in 1985 the reason really did not matter. I was to have Ms. Gibson. I remember Ms. Gibson introducing herself to us, her new class, a mix of students she already had for three weeks, and the new lot of us that came from across the hall. Ms. Gibson told us she was from South Carolina, and she pulled down the United States map that hung above the chalkboard to show us where that was, and I distinctly remember that neither my kindergarten nor my original first grade teacher told us they were from anywhere. Ms. Gibson made herself human to us, and I remember that it was then that I understood teachers left the school, had lives, had families, and came from somewhere.

Ms. Gibson was the kind of teacher that you loved so much, and you would do anything to get positive attention from her. She often walked around the room and would touch our shoulders, or praise us for reading; the little things that mean a lot to a 1<sup>st</sup> grader. For that reason, receiving the praise of Ms. Gibson, or that special little conversation she would take the time to have with you, was special, and I suspect that my classmates, like I, did anything for her to be pleased with us, actively avoiding of disappointing behavior. I had a horrible habit of following Ms. Gibson around the room and poking at her middle just above her skirt (Ms. Gibson always wore skirts), on her blouse or sometimes on her hand, and to this day I see the image and the smile that preceded the “Why Kenny, now what can I do for you?” Ms. Gibson never yelled at me for ‘behavior’ that was not unlike what I did in other grades that was often a cause of being chastised. Ms. Gibson cared, she listened, and she always made sure that whatever she said back to me was meaningful and demonstrative of her paying close attention to what I had to say—I mattered, and I remember mattering.

I knew, and still know that Ms. Gibson loved me like she loved all her students. 1<sup>st</sup> grade was 20 years ago for me, and I surely do not remember the content of my 1<sup>st</sup> grade conversations with Ms. Gibson, but I distinctly remember that despite our lopsided dialogue, which often involved me talking and Ms. Gibson listening, Ms. Gibson always listened. I also remember, both in her interactions with me and in observing her interact with other students, that whenever we were done talking Ms. Gibson always had something “important” to say that simultaneously acknowledged she listened, she supported us as her students (and in many ways as her metaphorical children—children she deeply cared for), and she always left us with something to think about. It was leaving us with something to think about before we talked again that made our ‘talk’ not mere simple conversation, it became dialogue, ongoing and continuous. Dialogue was always a critical part of Sarah Gibson’s classroom, and is the supportive listening and responding that Lawrence-Lightfoot identifies as so crucial to respect. As an educator myself, I have to assume that dialogue was a critically important part of her pedagogy, a pedagogy that

was indicative of a culturally specific way of participating in meaningful dialogue with us as her students.

As a 4<sup>th</sup> grade bi-lingual classroom and 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish teacher, in both Rochester City Schools as well as a suburban district near Rochester New York, I always tried to remember the patience and care with which Ms. Gibson listened and responded to us. I never perfectly mastered dialogue, or at least not such a culturally specific dialogue that Ms. Gibson was able to engage us with. I tend to get excited and loud when I talk to anyone, and my friends often “shhhhhshd” me or ask if I know how loud I am being. Ms. Gibson had a quiet power in her way of listening and dialoging with us, but what I did make a point of doing in my craft and practice as a teacher was to listen and respond as a means of respecting students and parents. I was and continue to be genuinely interested in what students and parents have to say to me, and as a K-12 teacher wanted to give back to my students and their families what Ms. Gibson gave to me. One aspect of my practice throughout my K-12 teaching career was to eat with students three to four times a week during lunch. From the fourth graders, all the way to the high school seniors I taught, I always made it a point of eating, listening, and talking with students during lunch. Not only were students able to see me as human, but they were able to talk, and have me listen, and always leave them, like Ms. Gibson had done with me, with something “meaningful” to think about. Dialogue was not just left to the lunchroom. Dialogue was always present in the classroom as well. Weekly class meetings, individual conferencing, and discussions with students during class allowed me to gain a considerable amount of insight into my students and their lives, their hopes, their fears, and their challenges in a system where they do not feel that they are important. Through our dialogue, students, particularly students of color who were and are often marginalized by an education system that silences their wealth of intellect and experiences, had the opportunity to teach me and for me to listen in a way where they were positioned as teacher. I gained a wealth of knowledge about music, language, food, life, and “academic” subjects from the students that I would have missed had I chose not to engage in meaningful dialogue.

Another practice influenced by Ms. Gibson’s dialogue was a system I developed in order to call three parents a night for three minutes each. Ms. Gibson did not engage in this particular practice herself, but my hope in calling home was to replicate the type of dialogue and feelings that go along with the way Ms. Gibson engaged both with students and parents. My calling practice, from the first to the last day of school, allowed me to communicate with parents at least monthly (weekly when I taught fourth grade). For families that had no phone I would make home visits once a month spending a half hour or so with the families. The purposes of these phone calls and visits was to share positives about the student, and to also meaningfully listen to what parents had to tell me. Often knowing more about the nuances of their children than the children themselves, parents in my

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experience have a lot of important information about their child and how to best work with the student that is surely missed when dialogue is not established. Through my phone calls, I feel that I had a direct line of dialogue between parents that helped bridge an often, and historically, strained relationship between home and school. Often in September the parents would say something like “it’s the first week of school what could possibly be wrong?” When I shared that this was a positive phone call and explained the purpose, many parents informed me that no teacher had ever called home to share a positive about their child. One high school parent said “it took 13 years for someone to tell me they liked my child and care about not only how she does in school but how she is doing as a person.” How often are students and parents really engaged in dialogue with educators? To the best of my ability I made time to engage in dialogue, meaningful to students and parents, sharing my voice with them, and in turn respecting the powerful voice they shared with me. Ms. Gibson taught me, through her practice, that dialogue was essential to respect.

#### *Respect as attention...Ms. Geraldine McFadden*

Another guiding principle of respect for Lawrence-Lightfoot is attention (2000/2001). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2001), attention involves being “fully present, completely in the room, sometimes engaged in vigorous conversation, and sometimes bearing silent witness.” By respecting through attention, we give of ourselves to others, we give attention to the details, the small things, and we are able to carry those with us long after the moment has passed.

Ms. McFadden was the music teacher I had all 7 years that I attended #41 elementary school in Rochester, New York. I remember the light wood piano that eclipsed the body of Ms. McFadden, and so it was her face that I remember more than anything, but she too, always wore knee length skirts just like Ms. Gibson. Going to music was a journey, especially in the younger grades when her room was located all the way on the third floor. Ms. McFadden gave of herself to us as her students in a way that as an educator myself I can now say makes her stand out as one of the very best educators I have ever known. Ms. McFadden paid careful attention to each and everyone of us, and without even looking she could pick out the student who was off beat or struggling to get a note out on key—and I have to admit that was often me. Ms. McFadden, by paying attention to us was not only “fully present” in the moment, but her attention proved to us that she loved us with all our ‘singing and dancing’—singing and dancing that really only a mother could love because it was often a mess, particularly in kindergarten when it seemed to be a lot of screaming and running, not really singing and dancing. The attention Ms. McFadden paid to her students was also critically important to the way she approached teaching us. Knowing I was German, I remember her picking some German language songs for us to sing, one in particular Edelweis, and likewise for other students, always singing a wide variety of songs that ranged from Jazz,

to Reggae, to Negro Spirituals, to Feliz Navidad, and to the Draddle song for Hanukah. #41 school was a low-income school with a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, and in my class there were Caribbean students, children of African and European immigrants, a Jewish student, and many students from working class backgrounds, African American, Latino/a, and white alike. We sang songs that celebrated who we were, and that was only possible because Ms. McFadden was so fully present in the way she gave attention and in the way she was able to know who we were.

Ms. McFadden could “lay a student out” as well, putting us “in our place” when we “acted up”; meaning that Ms. McFadden not only had standards but would correct our behavior in a swift and immediate way for behavior that was not acceptable for her. I remember several times Ms. McFadden getting on us, for being to “silly” or “goofy” in class. Once, when a group of us laughed uncontrollably for 5 or 10 minutes, distracting the others in class, she pulled us right out of her classroom by the arm and said “this behavior is just simply not acceptable.” She would tell us about the love she had for us, and for me knowing that she knew me better than most any other teacher in the school, she was able to snap me right into place. Listening to us at times, talking to us at times, and talking with us at times, Ms. McFadden gave copious amounts of real authentically engaged attention, always doing whatever it took for us to feel like we had her full attention.

Some of my best memories of Ms. McFadden were in choir; I had no sense of rhythm or pitch, and am slightly tone deaf, but Ms. McFadden always made sure that anyone who wanted to could participate in choir. Participation in an elementary choir may seem a small detail for some, however for many of us, our sense of self and identity were wrapped up into what it meant to be full participants in our schooling experience. Many times in my K-12 experience I did not feel like I was a full participant in my schooling, that there was not a space that allowed me to be both myself and fully included/accepted by teachers and school adults in activities like sports, drama club, etc.; I felt like I had to change aspects of myself to fit a teachers notion of what it means to participate in the various aspects of school. As a White male I am cognizant that this sense of not belonging is compounded for students of color for whom the pedagogy of many teachers, as well as the full experience of school, is not centered on or designed for them. Therefore, so much of how Ms. McFadden paid attention to us as students is largely indicative of how she allowed our participation in choir; no one, despite lack of singing talent, was ever excluded. Ms. McFadden was also smart enough to know that paying attention to me, and other students, did not mean she had to jeopardize her choir, and there were many occasions where she simply told me, “Kenny, baby, you’re just gonna pretend like your singing, move your mouth, but don’t really let the words come out.” For me I knew she was saying, “Kenny, you can’t sing, but I still love and respect you, and no matter what you matter to me.” This sense, that I mat-

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tered, that she paid attention, was crucial for my well being as a youngster who often found school a difficult space that did not welcome my participation and my voice. Her honesty was also indicative of her attention and respect, because she did not patronize me or lie to me about my under-developed musical ear. Many other teachers would have said, “you are not going to be in this choir,” or “you are such a good singer” (and then would have made fun of what a bad singer I was in the teachers lounge—I saw this happen far too often when I was a teacher, colleagues who gave false and empty praise only to make fun of the student in the spaces of school where students are not allowed like office space and teachers lounges) but not Ms. McFadden, and her request that I lip sync never felt like rejection, it felt like love and respect embedded through attention.

I recently spoke with Ms. McFadden, to tell her that I was going to be writing this piece and I was not surprised to find that she immediately remembered me, saying “Kenny Varner, how are you sweetness?” That is the kind of teacher that Ms. McFadden was—she paid attention to the details, 15 years after last having Ms. McFadden, she knew me; the detail to attention she paid mattered. Ms. McFadden asked how my parents were, and was so happy to hear from me. Then Ms. McFadden said “Kenny baby, I am so glad you called me, you are one student I will bring to the grave with me... a voice like that, but you came back every time, and I loved you for that.” Again, this acknowledgement of my lack of singing ability, in a direct and honest way, is most indicative of the respect she paid through attention, a respect I could only aspire to attain as an educator.

As a teacher, respecting my students through paying close attention was a critically important aspect of my pedagogy that Ms. McFadden taught me. Many of the students that I taught, particularly students of color, were not used to having attention paid to them by their teachers, short of negative attention that is. In my teacher preparation I always kept Ms. McFadden’s attention with me, and through coursework became better in tune with the way that other students, namely students of color, are often not paid attention to. I would not be able to teach and be a part of a system that allowed students to be subjugated by my pedagogy. I committed myself to engage in practice that was centered on students that made them the subjects of my attention. Attention often times came in the form of little things. For example, I always stood in the hallway before any class that I taught, personally greeting each student, every day, asking them how their day was, and making contact with other students going to their own classes. I made a very concerted effort to notice new haircuts, birthdays, and anything else that would help students know that I paid attention. Another pedagogical practice that I implemented was a systematic means of documenting classroom interactions with students and anecdotal observations on sticky notes, housing the anecdotal information in a notebook that documented the students experience in my class throughout the year. Whenever I met with students and parents, I was able to reference specific

quotes from the students, particular specific observations that I made. Assessment in my classroom always took place in narrative form so that students and parents knew that I was fully present and that students were paid attention to. Any student that was absent was missed, and I made sure as a teacher to follow up with students that were absent to make sure they were alright. As a teacher I began sending letters home every 5 weeks that summarized, personally for each student, the anecdotal information that I gathered. Students did not fail my class, as failure would have meant that 10 weeks went by without having paid careful enough attention to my students. A failure in my class would have indicated a failure on my part, not on the students’ part. My self sense of success as a teacher was measured in carefully paying attention to each of my students. My practice was also honest, and while I never had to tell a student they did not know how to sing, I made sure that by paying attention I could be honest with children about both how they and I were performing. Every 10 weeks, students fully evaluated my practice and those evaluations were summarized and then shared with the students, parents, and administrators in my buildings. I was often criticized by my colleagues on this practice, particularly that I shared the results with students, parents, and administrators, including data which may not have been favorable for me, as they said students should not have a voice to offer feedback on teacher practice. For me, the practice was invaluable to my pedagogy by ensuring that it was steeped in paying attention to students and being willing to hear that which they enjoyed and that which they wished would change. Student evaluation, and change in my practice based on those evaluations, was important for me as an educator so that students knew that they had a voice, and that I paid attention and listened to their voices. Ms. McFadden was that teacher for me, and helped me develop a multitude of practices that were aimed at respecting my students through attention.

#### *Respect as self-respect... Ms. Rosa Bell*

The concept of self-respect as highlighted by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2001) deals with developing a “...self-confidence that does not seek external validation or public affirmation...learning to live by our own internal compass, one defined by a daily, private, vigilance.” Of all of the qualities of respect, this has perhaps been the most difficult to consistently hold on to. In particular it is recently that I have been able to go back to understand what made Ms. Rosa Bell such a wonderful and special Black women educator, although her influence on my practice has always been important.

Ms. Bell was the house administrator, one of three at Charlotte Middle School, a large urban Middle school in Rochester New York. I remember that she was a very light skinned Black woman, and she wore glasses, which I thought made her look distinguished with her business like suits. Ms. Bell stood tall, not necessarily with height (I really do not remember how tall Ms. Bell was/is), but with pride. Ms.

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Bell was proud of her role as our administrator, and the respect she had for herself and for the job she did filled the hallways of the school. When she greeted us as we got off of the buses she would say “welcome to another good day in my house;” when she walked around the lunchroom, she would pick up something if it fell on the floor and ask us to do the same saying, “my house is a clean house;” when she visited classrooms she would always say things that showed she was proud to be there and we should be as well. We were in House A, the 1<sup>st</sup> floor and basement of what was a very large school, and the building itself was nothing really pretty—as a matter of fact the basement where many of my classes were, was a dark and cold place. Somehow though the pride and self respect of Ms. Bell, a true confidence that was not dependant on being validated or authenticated, seemed to fill the halls with something that was not there in terms of aesthetics. Ms. Bell filled the hallways with student art, messages of self-empowerment, and pride posters.

In 7<sup>th</sup> grade I remember getting in trouble for something and being “written up”—that is what teachers called having a discipline form written that documented alleged infractions—and sent to the office. I do not remember the specifics, and I was not accustomed to being in the office, certainly in large part to the White privilege that I receive, because I did as many ‘bad’ things as students of color who were frequently sent out, while I and other White students seemed to have a much larger leash in terms of our behavior before being sent out. I sat there worried about a lot of things as I waited for Ms. Bell to call me into her office: what would my mother say to me if she called home? Was this going in my permanent record? When Ms. Bell called me into the office I was shocked; she did not ask me “what will your mother think?” as I had expected, or spend a lot of time with a lecture about the deference I should show to the adults that sent me out of the classroom. Ms. Bell started by saying, “Kenny, is this good enough for you?, is this who and what you see yourself as being? I don’t know about you, but when I get up in the morning I have to know that what I do and who I am is good enough for me, so I don’t care right now about Ms. Crowley [the teacher who sent me out], your classmates, your mother, or even me; is this good enough for you Kenny?” This was a powerful intervention, although one that I often forget, as like many other people, I get caught up in how I am viewed and perceived by others. Walker (1996) writes, “I lost what attachment I had to the image others might have of me, since I learned decisively that this is an area over which I have little control” (p. 33). Like Walker, Ms. Bell knew that being validated or punished by others, being constructed or not constructed as this or that by others was something that she and I had little to no control over. It is pride, a confidence for myself that I do have control over, and Ms. Bell demonstrated and modeled what self-respect looked like for her so that we could draw from her lessons. I remember at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, Ms. Bell handed me my diploma and said, “now Kenny **this** is

good enough for you, isn’t?” I smiled, and hugged Ms. Bell and said “Yes, yes it is!”

As a teacher I tried often to remember Ms. Bell in terms of my interactions with students so that I both demonstrated and advocated for self-respect. This was difficult, in a sense, at times because in my experiences as an educator, particularly once I taught high school, many of my students of color had been deflated by many years where they were told they were not good enough, that they were bad, that their work was bad, and that they were not capable of doing well. Many students came in to my class after having spent a whole day with people who focused on challenging any effort students made to see themselves as having self-respect. I myself have also battled with issues of weight, negative self image, and having worked in buildings where colleagues actively worked against my practice and pedagogy causing me to often operate with my colleagues from a defensive position. That is why, at times, even though Ms. Bell was with me, I think that the concept of self-respect, outside of my classroom walls, was a difficult challenge for both students and myself. However, in my class, we operated from a belief that all students could do well, and that doing well involved confidence and self respect.

One practice to encourage self-respect was to have students leave every class with an index card telling me one thing they did well today and one thing they would do well before they saw me again (which when I taught high school was every other day). I would also engage in this practice. This informal contract was meant to help both students and myself, and I used a language that encouraged us to respect our own selves, and to walk with a mission of doing well. At the beginning of class we would talk about our goals and if we had met them, and with time we were able to do this process in Spanish, the subject I taught to students, thus achieving not only encouraging our self-respect dialogue, but also achieving our academic goals of better learning and using Spanish for practical meaningful purposes.

Many of the high school students I taught had failed Spanish in the past, and so a strategy that I implored was to provide a large amount of positive feedback on students’ papers and work, and plan activities where students could be successful from the very first day. Students, receiving grades of A’s, that they **earned**, became a very important part of my classroom, and changed the students’ views of themselves. Students began to see themselves in a way in which doing well was a respected act, both expected and noticed in my classroom, and thus changed the way in which students were able to engage in Spanish.

A final classroom practice that was meant to increase self respect as influenced by Ms. Bell was a pen-pal project that we conducted with a bi-lingual elementary school in Rochester, New York. The students I taught, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year Spanish students would write letters back and forth with 2<sup>nd</sup> graders who did not speak English. When the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders wrote back, and the letters indicated that they understood

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what my students had written, the students' images of self changed, and a new confidence with their Spanish began to demonstrate a new self-respect students had. My students often became mentors for those 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, and the relationship was fundamental for increasing my students' belief that they could learn Spanish, use it in a meaningful context, and be a part of others lives in a positive way with a language other than English. Every year when we would go and meet the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, my students walked around the elementary school like proud brothers and sisters, speaking Spanish with their pen pals.

### Conclusion

*Respect as healing...Ms. Gibson, Ms. McFadden, and Ms. Bell*

In Ms. Gibson, Ms. McFadden, Ms. Bell, and all the other Black women educators I have had and continue to have as a university student, I have found both my metaphorical caretakers and healers. These women have not only informed my practice, but also allow me to continue to grow as an academic, hopefully continuing to spread the traditions, political and epistemological, of Black women educators. Respect is healing! Lawrence-Lightfoot (2001) talks about respect as healing in terms of "...nourish[ing] a feeling of worthiness, of wholeness, and well being." The Black women educators that have been presented in the preceding vignettes embody respect not only for the quality of respect highlighted for each, but also in their embodiment of healing; they have helped me to feel well and worthy both as a student and as an educator, embodying what Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000) has said about respect, namely that "respect generates respect; a modest loaf becomes many" (p. 10).

Before the presentation of the vignettes I posed a part of what bell hooks (1984) has articulated as a concern namely that "...there are so few images of intellectual women who are non-white" (p. 114). While I have not answered this concern directly, I hope that the presentation of the vignettes about Black women teachers who instructed me and their influence on me as both student and educator serves in the tradition of naming our intellectual mothers, our Black women educators. Further, I hope that highlighting these Black Women continues the work as part of this larger well fed and flourishing garden of academics and intellectuals whom are Black women. I would argue that work like this, along with the work of many scholars writing about Black women teachers, can present to others the images of intellectuals of color so that others understand that the images are in fact many. It is the work of scholars like Ladson-Billings, Gay, Beauboeuf-Lafontant, Irvine, Collins, Dixon, Dingus, and **many** countless others who have started this concerted and meaningful effort of making plentiful the images of intellectual women educators of color that more work is making its way to the forefront of discussion and under-

standing. In some small way I hope that the vignettes of these Black women educators I have presented, become part of the growing literature on the pedagogical practices of Black women teachers.

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