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The Miseducation of Black Youth: Black youth spittin’ lyrical lessons of Black joy, laughter, and affirmation in the rural south

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The Black Educology Mixtape is an open-access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. We feature a collective of Black people working to amplify and empower Black educational voices. Our scope and sequence focus on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.

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The Miseducation of Black Youth: Black youth spittin' lyrical lessons of Black joy, laughter, and affirmation in the rural south

Julia A. Lynch, EdD, Beth Gafford, EdD, Jarvis Jackson, PhD, Morgan Worsley, Joseph McCrary, Cameron Lynch, Samuel Gafford

ABSTRACT

This counter-storytelling performance highlights the educational experiences of Black youth living in the Rural Black South. In the shadows of critical race theory and critical teaching pedagogy, the researchers draw from BlackMothering scholarship as a theoretical framework to illuminate insights into how Black faculty create critical pedagogy to help make students more critical consumers of their educational experiences and provide them with skills to produce counternarratives. The researchers created a critical teaching project that allowed Black youth participants space to critically reflect, interrogate, and dialogue about their educational experiences and in doing so the youth created verses to song telling their stories. This project highlights three significant findings when teachers use an arts-based approach as a critical teaching practice: Black youth agency to resist, Academic mobility, and Black youth intellectualism and identity.

Prelude: Setting the Stage

This counter-storytelling performance highlights the educational experiences of Black youth living in the Rural Black South. In the shadows of critical race theory and critical teaching pedagogy the researchers draw from a BlackMothering Scholarship as a critical theoretical framework to illuminate insights into how Black faculty create critical pedagogy to help make students more critical consumers of their educational experiences and provide them with skills to produce counternarratives. The researchers created a critical teaching project that allowed Black youth participants space to critically reflect, interrogate, and dialogue about their educational experiences and in doing so the youth created verses to song telling their stories. This project is titled: The Miseducation of Black Youth, that highlights three significant findings; Black youth agency to resist, Academic mobility, and Black Youth Intellectualism & Identity.

Beat Drop

“Cardiac Arrest”

Acum Acum...Alright let me clear my throat, I'm finna sit this one down with the beats that make you lay down

Yo' head like you shame of the fact that you fail to recognize the smart on my Black, the ways my skin don't crack, but I see the ways that you choose to engage me

With your the corners of so called pissed-on celebrity styled

Phony wanna be

Teaching.

Yea, sit down and listen in while I'm listening to you listen-in on the Black intellectual jargon I can spit off the dome.

Yea, I can spit that slit that slice that double back and put you in the jail celled closed in no access to the freedom that my grandmother drew

In the her hands as she danced around the sun, praying that one day God'll see her

*through I wear my heart on my sleeve, hoping, wishing, steady thinking how my hoodie
can hide the pain inside, hide the fear of a Black body laying by the wayside in the walls of
the school in the class that I was supposed to be learning.*

*Instead I lay dead, without a pulse, staring back at the same hands trying to revive me
with the same hands that tried to take me from.*

My family

*Lord please get me out this body, they tryna take away my spirit and nail it inside a coffin
Staring back at the hands trying to revive me, my eyes start to haze, body jumping with
every volt fighting to stay alive*

I feel a glaze, a spot of hope

*I feel the dreams my momma dreamed, I feel the freedom my grandma drew I feel that in
my spirit and that-
they cannot kill*

In an attempt to grapple with the racist education systems that have extended the colonial project¹ post-slavery: A system that seeks to exclude, harm, erase, reform, and punish Black youth. In this track, four Black youth and three Black faculty co-constructed an ongoing project using a critical teaching framework as an urgent classroom intervention to highlight the reimagining's of schooling that protects Black youth from educational genocide. These struggles aren't new, as Love (2023) highlights the ways white rage continuously operationalizes the colonial project and plantation schooling by ensuring their educational policies create its very own redlining effect in schooling. Whereas redlining has been historically and continuously linked to structural racist systems that deny various services (e.g., credit access) to residents of specific neighborhoods based on race. Similarly, we make claims that the same structural racism exists within our post-colonial school systems whose discriminatory practices reinforce beliefs that uphold a staged law of exclusion. Those exclusions created within the education systems have left our students with the leftover scraps. Schooling as we know it—the performance, the experience, and the outputs of such schooling—has yet to benefit the Black student. Schools, schooling practices, and curriculum speak utterances of plantation-like terror as Black students, families, and communities are continuously looked at as outsiders, without the natural birth rights of an education. Instead, they are experiencing educational genocide as they are the most disciplined, and labeled “disabled,” overlooked for advanced courses, remain well below their racially constructed peers on standardized testing metrics, yet represent the highest number in the pipeline to prison. Black youth; despite having left the selling blocks of slavery, remain profitable commodities with no inherent human value.

Despite these educational disparities, Black students have increasingly established networked communities and a practice of fugitivity within their schools and communities in order to maintain their sustainability, increase their academic success, and create affirming spaces of joy within the carceral systems of schooling. Most recently, we have noticed an uptick in what we call the redlining effect in our schools, where advanced courses are withheld from Black students at a disproportionate rate based on testing qualifying factors. More specifically, in our districts, located within the Black belt, the state allows students to be placed in advanced courses if they have scored a level 5 on the state's end-of-year testing data. A test in which Black and other minoritized students have not shown proficiency over the last two decades, at a steady 30% decline. Through these colonized mechanisms, we contend that the college and career-readiness pipeline is clogged with inequitable acts of access for Black students.

This project drew upon BlackMothering Scholarship (BMS) as a critical theoretical framework in order to fully capture the historical and contemporary practices of Blackmothering that attend to the needs of their family and community in the Rural Black South (Lynch & Atkinson, 2023). BMS helps frame the beliefs, practices, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors of mothering (regardless of gender or parental familial considerations) that Blacks take up in the rural south as a preservation of life, cultural mobility, and sustainability. This framework also acknowledges

¹The ways that pre-slavery and colonialism still maintain their ideologies in a post-slavery society. Permeating within school systems that continue to practice racism that demonstrates the pervasive ways Blacks are seen as nonhuman with no rights to education.

how BlackMothering extends outside of academia to fully encapsulate the ways Blacks use their communal and cultural intuition as knowledge to read, understand, and engage in the world. We see this emerging theoretical framework in five specific areas: Protection, Care, Spirituality, Mobility, and Socio-Political Awareness. As Black faculty researchers, this theoretical framework was used to engage in a critical teaching pedagogy with our youth.

On this track, we explore what students are really saying about their schooling experience. It is a counter-story account of the messages that have been perpetuated about Black students in literature and common conversation. This counter-story is a form of resistance in an attempt to (re)claim the stories that are being shared and to demand change. Resistance in Black education is not a new phenomenon; we stand on the shoulders of those like Carter G. Woodson, Septima Clark, Joyce King, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and others who for centuries have said, “this is *enough*” (or not enough). In what is to follow on this track, we catch readers up to speed on what the conversation has been around Black education and its complexities (Chorus); help readers understand the methodological lens that we are looking through (Chorus 2.0); the youth in this conversation speak and share what they are really feeling (Verses); and we analyze and explore what we can learn from those verses giving readers some action points to move on (Dropping the Mic). The song is not to the tune of the normality of schooling; this is a new tune, for the youth’s sake, by the youth.

Chorus

We are all on one accord in one room with one sound

There’s a sound

A resounding sound

Tear it down

Tear down the walls of Jericho

Build a sound of Blackness

Black Education-Post Colonial

In a brief historical analysis of Black education, we found how individuals who identify as Black were on one accord in recognizing the influence of how freedom was directly related to their education. Ex Slaves rose out of slavery with a desire to learn to read and write as southern states eliminated Blacks from any political process that required citizens to pass a literacy test before they could vote (Anderson, 2010; Hanchett, 1988). Many Blacks saw education as a symbol of freedom and a way to improve their lives, their economic circumstances, and, particularly, a way to participate in their civic duties (Anderson, 2010). In the hopes of creating schools that met the demand of the Black communities growing population, they turned to the Freedmen Bureau, a federal organization that worked with Northern missionaries and benevolent organizations to place teachers in Southern states. However, as a result of the ideologies embedded with missionary work, Northern teachers sought to civilize Black people, but found that many Black communities refused to accept their ways of teaching (Anderson, 2010). Within Black communities there existed an educational movement that established their own way of schooling where, as Anderson (2010) notes, Black communities created their own ecosystems of learning that included education and social matters. Continuing a self-sustaining practice and avoiding the white dominated version of free schools was a community action deeply rooted in Black rural education.

Though some agreed with the self-sustaining educational systems in the Black community, some agricultural farmers saw this as a threat to their labor and a “weapon of political offense,” stating, “If we educate the Negro out of being a laborer, who is goin to take his place?” (Anderson, 2010, p. 96). To be sure we are speaking the same language of what it means to be rural, as researchers we believe that our location within the Black South in previously identified colonized states, situates us as the *Rural Black South*, (re)membering rural to mean the ways Blacks were and still are isolated and excluded, without access to freedom, and therefore excluded from the freedom that education brings. This very distinct niche helps us to further conceptualize how Black education is posited and also how it is interculturally dependent on community for the preservation of life. Therefore, in this (re)membrance we draw our readers also into (re)establishing how Black rural education is defined within the Black South and the

implications for how colonialism pervades our Black education, the ways Black youth continuously suffer because of the colonial project's persistence, and how colonialism extends post-colonially as rurality.

There's a sound

A resounding sound

Tear it down

Tear down the walls of Jericho

Build a sound of Blackness

A sound of Black

That don't crack..

Anti-Black Violence in Schools

The violence being enacted on our Black youth in the realm of education has been present since the inception of America, from exclusion during enslavement to separate but unequal schooling to disproportionate funding, overrepresentation of Black students in special education, and zero tolerance and other disciplinary policies that push Black students out of classrooms. This isn't just any kind of violence, it's specifically anti-Black violence. Anti-Black racism, as described by Dumas (2016), is one of the most invasive types of racism that dehumanizes and delegitimizes Black people in every aspect. Dumas (2016) further notes that there are many ways to theorize anti-Blackness, as it affects Black people in different ways, and some scholars apply Afro-pessimism to their theorization, while others don't. In the theorization of anti-Blackness in schools, scholars have taken a variety of approaches that share Dumas's notion that "anti-blackness allows one to capture the depths of suffering of Black children and educators in predominantly white schools" (p. 16). Love (2016) contextualizes anti-Black violence in schools as *spirit murdering*; spiritual, psychological, and personal harm inflicted upon individuals of color through the established yet dynamic structures of racism, privilege, and power. Johnson et al. (2019) situate the anti-Black violence in five categories—physical, symbolic, linguistic, curricular and pedagogical, and systemic—noting this violence, intentional and unintentional, continues to complicate the relationship with youth and students. Regardless of how it is theorized, without doubt, anti-Blackness within schools is metaphorically and actually killing the Black bodies of both students and teachers. We cannot sit idle, but we can move forward in our joy as a means to dismantle systems of anti-Blackness.

There's a sound

A resounding sound

Tear it down

Tear down the walls of Jericho

Build a sound of Blackness

A sound of Black

That don't crack

A sound of

Blackity Black Black.

Black Joy

What is joy and how can it be brought into the classroom for black students? The term joy can be given numerous definitions as we think back on what it may mean to us. However, black joy in the classroom is now a topic that is becoming an eye-opening discussion and focal point for professionals in the field of education.

Black joy can look and feel different from one individual to another. Tichavakuda (2022) viewed black joy as situational among classrooms and most significantly impacted by the intent of the leaders or teachers within the classroom. Adams (2022) viewed black joy as an environmental exchange that created a way for students to be successful and ultimately exceed basic expectations. Both scholars fused the contextual setting as the driving force behind black joy and defining it in relationship to students.

Educational settings that have a majority of white students, and teachers can create a feeling of disconnect and longing for black joy from black students in a PreK–12 public school setting. Finding black joy can spark from internal inspiration or be a driven force incited by an external event; more so, black joy is often highlighted through negative events that are marked to a high degree by the media (Tichavakunda, 2022). These events often lead a charge of emotions and a sense of pride that is expected to be shared by all within the black community. However, this is not the driving force for black joy within the classroom for students, and it does not connect black students together to create a fantasized unit of euphoria and black joy (Gilkes Borr, 2019).

The large push, and even push back, for more diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in PreK–12 public schools has created a shift in the approaches of educators to meet students' needs in the classroom. However, these initiatives have fallen short in recognition to build connections, engagement, relationships, and overall joy to black youth in schools (Williams, 2022). The shortcomings of these basic functions and support of students' needs are not valued the same by those who are not black students (Williams, 2022). This leaves students to appear disengaged, which further impacts support of their abilities to think critically in regard to academic work. Black students seek out their joy from beyond what teachers are presenting, or even failing to present (Williams, 2022), and instead shift to more meaningful personal experiences (Tichavakunda, 2022).

Chorus 2.0

What are the effects of schooling on Black youth; How do youth create affirming spaces in schools?

There's a sound

A resounding sound

Tear it down

Tear down the walls of Jericho

Build a sound of Blackness

A sound of Black Youth Agency

A sound of Critical Teaching

A Sound of Black Intellect

This study drew on BMS as a theoretical framework and arts-based research as methodological framework in an ongoing project to have Black youth make sense of their educational experiences. BMS uses cyclical methods of repetition always listening to the community's problems, engaging in dialogue, and offering ways of liberation through participatory action. In duet with BMS, researchers engaged in an arts-based research approach by using digital quilts as a point of entry into the critical conversation (Bhattacharya, 2013; Evans-Winters, 2019; Leavy, 2009). It is with this practice in mind we were able to engage with a critical teaching project where students engaged in critical thought using art, synthesized their knowledge and understandings within a sociocultural and sociopolitical context, and through dialogue created their own ecosystems of Black Joy, laughter, and affirmation disregards and/or with regards to their context. This approach allowed for open discussion using a visual picture as a point of inquiry.

Once the focus group information was transcribed, the youth were asked to go back and visit the specific words the researchers pulled. The students were then asked to create a verse based on major themes present in our dialogue. In doing so, the youth were able to see immediately what the three major themes were that illuminated their inequitable school experiences: teachers didn't know how to build relationships, Teachers were not engaged with them, and youth looked for Black joy outside of the school setting through sports or social events. In continuous dialogue, probing, and reflection with the researchers and each other, the students began to resist the dominant narratives that had arisen from their initial conversations. Instead, there was a shift where students began to (re)center themselves in the schools and began demonstrating how Black youth fugitivity can be operationalized

and used as placemaking within carceral systems. We see these counter stories come out in the verses they shared with the researchers as Show Stoppa (Morgan Worsley), Stomping Ground (Cameron Lynch) feat. Lil G (Samuel Gafford), and Jay Z (Joseph McCrary), ShowStoppa's verse speaks to Black youth agency, Stomping Ground feat. Lil G speaks to critical teaching, and Jay Z's verse highlights Black intellectualism & identity.

Show Stoppa's Verse

I mean sometimes, it's just easier to answer the question and get it over with. I may be listening to the teacher not just looking dead in their face, but I'm ingesting what they're saying.

We all are different and some of us might be neurodivergent and teachers just need to know that.

I am free because of emancipation, but I am liberated because of education. In a world where being Black is more than just a hue, but a life dedicated to singing American blues. In a world where Black is not the fiery flame that keeps the world warm, but rather the coal remains tossed away when it's been used and worn. In a world where every educational standard is not made with people like me in mind, but every law and regulation is. In a world where we are taught that Black is controversial even as kids. I am the student I am and will remain the student the world doesn't want me to be because education is what liberates me.

Black Youth Agency to Resist

As Black youth began to reflect on their current educational experiences, their reflections collectively, and also individually, started to naturally speak about what sounded like a numbness toward the carcerality that they have experienced in schools. However, the Black youth, particularly Show Stoppa, found ways to challenge and push back against those schooling experiences. For example, in frustration with feeling silenced and invisible in the classroom, Show Stoppa states, "I just keep my head down and do what I gotta do".

Stomping Ground Feat. Lil G Verse

I think school and teachers like feels gotta get comfortable teaching around different kinds of kids from different perspectives and different backgrounds.

I mean my relationships with my teachers are so far so good, cause I make the best of the class I'm in. The school I'm in.

So I feel like we like going to school, but school don't like us. They gotta do a lot better because they have to understand.. like where people (youth) are coming from or stuff like that.

*Yea, they gotta take us outside, sit us under the trees
Let me open my book as I feel the cool breeze
The breeze fills my lungs reminds me of the Spring
I can open up my mind and wonder what the day brings*

Yea, 5 Starr, you gotta try to build relationships with students because it helps us learn more and feel more comfortable in their (teachers) territory.

Teachers gotta be able to reach us and don't be scared to talk about what's happening (outside of the classroom). Cause if their (students) attention is on something else, then talk about it you know? Don't be scared

*Cause teachers can teach us more than just school, but also life.
Cause we talk more about other stuff in my computer science class, and we still get work
done I feel like I like structure because it helps me to focus and be more productive in class,
This is Stomping Grounds and thank you for coming in stomping with me!!*

Critical Teaching

Black youth want to experience culturally responsive pedagogy that not only affirms who they are but also attends to the academic rigor and sociopolitical events that are happening that affect the ways the student shows up in class. Show Stoppa also spoke extensively about this idea as well stating, “I mean I know we gotta learn stuff, but if something major has happened the day before it's like crickets in the classroom and the students be talking about it, so I don't know why the teachers aren't.”

Jay Z² Verse

*I mean I just get bored, cause teachers teaching me what I already know. I don't ever raise
my hand cause they ain't gonna call on me no way.
I just think that they (white students) just have more like more experience, I guess, of
learning with a teacher than everybody else. So they are more comfortable answering
questions.*

*These teachers don't know how to build a connection with me, because, like most of the
kids in my class are like Black and like, it's maybe a couple of white students, and like only
like a couple of like white students, but they is answering the questions the whole time, and
like the other ones (Black students), are not and the teacher don't ever call on us either.
It's like they scared of us.*

Black Youth Intellectualism & Identity

The Black youth participants in this study grappled with the idea that their Black identity does or could also occupy intellect. They noticed the ways that classroom demographics appeared to have all the “smart white” students in them, and therefore, for them it seemed that space could not be occupied by them. It was parallel to the ways we as researchers see how the colonial project post-slavery is structured in our schools and classroom that continuously tells a story of how high-quality education is the territorial right of whites, and Blacks are excluded.

Mic Drop

Mental & Emotional Wellness

Recently, there was a special issue of rural education that highlighted trauma-informed practices mental health practitioners employed in Black rural school districts. Threaded throughout the work was a narrative of the ways poverty, suicide, ADHD, and substance abuse contributed to the high ACEs scores for minoritized students living in rural areas (see The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Clinicians and mental health counselors go on to design and implement trauma-informed practices within their schools to help build students' social-emotional learning and to help reduce the impact of life's traumas. Careful not to desensitize the mental health needs of our Black youth students, we must also challenge the narrative that schools act as hospitals and safe havens that are incapable of inflicting harm and causing death. In a deeper analysis of the conversations in the focus group, as the students revealed a sense of agency of resistance, it wasn't easily obtained. Black youth are under an enormous amount of stress to perform “intellectualism” and “worthiness” when they know their counterparts simply don't have to. Schools should consider the ways that structural racism—that is, the ways that society has structured racial relationships, situates how Black students interpret and see themselves as intellectuals, gifted, and brilliant. In that, academic success involves critical thinking that draws on the intellectual abilities that challenge students.

Academic Mobility

Our lives have transformed over the years, yet schools have attempted to remain the same. Moreover, rather than consider the needs and wants of Black students, schooling continues to perpetuate white norms. Any disruption of these norms is therefore undermined as noncompliance or defiance. The issue with that is the messages that have been shared not only reifies that Blackness is not welcomed, it impacts the student's overall well-being and understanding of themselves and how they fit into the world (O'Connor, 2016). We are not asking for a school for just Black students (though some might argue that we should), but we are asking for *education*. Not just any education, though: one that encompasses who Black students are.

In our findings, students faced with systemic injustices, found ways to (re)claim their agency to move towards academic mobility. That is, the ability to move through their academic journeys with agency. As seen in this study and as reported by O'Connor (2016), Black students found ways not to allow the injustices they experienced to derail their schooling experience. Instead, they use the injustice as *fuel for dreaming*. It's like turning lemons into lemonade, or even into lemon trees. One of the important notions seen is the collective responsibility assumed by students, providing peer mentorship, advisement, and support. For example, Stomping Ground spoke extensively about mentoring a good friend so that the student would remain eligible to play sports. That mentoring was explicitly tied to choices and actions that could lead to disciplinary actions that keep students ineligible to play. Recognizing not only the academic genius in their peers, Black students also wanted their peers to experience joy by participating in activities they were skilled at. In contrast to their white peers, Black students are more likely to support each other with academic goals while being somewhat equally susceptible to negative peer pressure regarding high achievement (O'Connor, 2016).

We must note, this narrative does not fit every Black student's situation, and there will be spaces where students are receiving neither peer support nor school support. What we can learn from these students though is what are possibilities to counteract the negative experiences. In spaces where we cannot transform the larger system, we can make room for collectivism to occur. Examples of that include Black student alliances. While this study shows how students benefited and created their own academic mobility, we know also this will support students in other forms of anti-black violence within schools, further supporting their academic means.

Academic mobility is resistance. It is saying that regardless of the systemic injustices or the individual actions of educators, administrators, or policy and decision-makers, agency trumps the roadblocks. It says that if "they" won't care for and nurture our academic journeys, we will do so ourselves. It is a collective responsibility, community, and an ode that *ain't a soul gonna keep us down*. Ya' heard?

Spacemaking/Placemaking

Findings from the study illuminated how the Black community and culture has historically served as a driving force of unity for black students to flourish. We see that Black mothers who are situated in the Black South understand the ways colonialism persists within educational systems. With that specific understanding, Black mothers use their cultural intuition to push not only their own children but also any Black student they encounter to be sure that they are always in pursuit of justice and liberation. Over time we see how the Black woman's role as caretaker for the family is extended to her community and beyond (Baptiste-Brady, 2022). This fostered and developed the style of black mothering due to the Black woman not only taking care of their own children but also caring for the overseer's children as well during colonial times. We see this trait move from generation to generation and now it is flourishing in the classroom. Black mothers see their own children in every Black student they encounter; the colonized trait of being the caretaker ultimately wins and Black teachers find themselves doing so much more to ensure black students succeed. We also bear witness to the ways BlackMothering creates a liberatory space for students. Students spoke freely about their experiences with each other and us as the researchers. The dialogic space offered the Black youth a refuge; a pause in their educational genocide to reflect and dream of a new life way.

To combat feelings of disconnection and the lack of support for Black Joy, students find themselves developing their own pathways to promote personal success and academic sustainability. While some students form interest groups such as Black Student Alliance clubs, others make do with spaces available on campus but outside of the classroom to create a sense of peace, belonging, and Black Joy. Youth participants in the study correlated what they feel Black Joy means to them through the identified themes of Black youth agency, critical teaching, and Black youth intellectualism & identity. This trio of themes together reflect a feeling of forgottenness or overlooked potential and accomplishments in academics.

Outro: Fade to Black

There's a sound

A resounding sound

Tear it down

Tear down the walls of Jericho

Build a sound of Blackness

A sound of Black Youth Agency

A sound of Critical Teaching

A Sound of Black Intellect

Intentional teaching to reach Black students has now been placed back in the shadows despite the nationwide push for more diversity, equity, and inclusion **practices**. Black youth are not only pressed by their culture to strive and achieve, which is a deep root of BMS, but they are also pressed to find their own space within a very intentionally white education system that connects back to colonialism. It is here that we also remember rural to mean the ways Blacks were and still are isolated and excluded, without access to freedom, and therefore excluded from the freedom that education brings. We see how systemic injustices are perpetuated through testing and performance tactics that exclude Black intellectualism from academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) services. AIG services are also used to create a privatized educational experience where students are homogeneously grouped to take advanced courses in middle school and then eligible for honors and dual enrollment in high school. When Black students are denied this pathway and other academic mobility services aside from athleticism, Black students remain disproportionately represented in colleges and universities than their peers. As BMS-practitioners we are not limiting the reimaginings of what our Black youth can do outside a college degree, however, we are still pursuing the inherent rights to cultural sustainability (e.g., economic, academic, health, etc.) that an equitable education can bring. With a focus on teaching pedagogy that offers a space of dialogue, reflection, and action; we believe that our Black youth possess the intergenerational trait of Black agency within themselves to create an educational environment that is life-sustaining and life-saving.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributors

Julia Lynch, Ed.D., is a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. Julia's interests are guided by a focus on the identity of the Black women teachers and students and their lived experiences across their educational experiences. Generally speaking, her scholarship explores teacher identity and pedagogical practices within rural education contexts. She operates primarily from a BlackMothering framework to engage in critical qualitative research that promotes equity and social justice in rural education teaching and learning. A Black poet scholar, she engages in critical qualitative research that attempts to center the lives and experiences of

other Black scholars, while also disrupting normative research that doesn't honor the authenticity of the researcher or culturally sustain the community of participants.

Beth Gafford is currently an Assistant Professor at Randolph College in the Education Department, where she works with pre-service teachers seeking initial teaching license(s) in special education and/or elementary education in the state of Virginia. She holds an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Virginia, where her research focused on the identification process of twice-exceptional students. Beth is currently furthering her research in this area, as well as exploring other research interests, including disparities identified by Black students and educators in schools today. Her passion for research lies in action research that directly impacts the field and practice of education.

Jarvais Jackson, Ph.D., is an assistant professor specializing in culturally responsive pedagogy at Georgia Southern University. He earned his Ph.D. in Teaching and Learning from the University of South Carolina. His research focuses on education equity for Black students and families. With extensive experience in teaching and directing educational initiatives, Dr. Jackson's international engagement includes Fulbright-Hays Group Abroad Studies in Ghana, Nigeria, and Barbados. He's a prolific author with publications on Black education, equity, and Afrocentric pedagogies.

Morgan Worsley, 11th grade, lead youth researcher, currently attends D.H. Conley High School, where she serves as student body president. She is the Vice President of Charitable Events for HOSA and a member of Riley's Army, FBLA, Link Crew, and several other honor societies. Morgan regularly engages in community service and promotes reform in her school and neighborhood. She recently started a Black Student Union at her high school and is involved in several nonprofit organizations. She is a Teen Ambassador for the Ronald McDonald House Charities-ENC, a volunteer for Something2Somebody Feeding Ministry, a member of the Pitt-Greenville Chamber of Commerce Teen Leadership Institute, and Pitt County 4H. Morgan plans to major in public health education after high school with hopes to utilize this degree to help close the gap in health outcomes between communities of color and white populations.

Cameron Lynch, 7th grade, C/O 2029, is a student-athlete who is actively involved in an all-Black boys leadership institute called Max Factor. Cameron's favorite thing to do is to play basketball and spend time with family. He currently plays for a travel AAU team, as well as his middle school team. He is intelligent, brave, kind, smart, and athletic, and he has hopes of attending college for either sports medicine or bio-medicine.

Samuel Gafford is a twice-exceptional sixth grader at a private school in Virginia, where he participates in their advanced/accelerated learners' curriculum in math. He has become a self-advocate for his autism diagnosis and is most proud of his math abilities. Samuel's academic interests include math and history. In his spare time he enjoys reading history novels, hunting, playing lacrosse, basketball, and soccer.

Joseph McCrary is a junior at D.H. Conley High School. Joseph has been recognized for both his academic and athletic accomplishments. He is a runner for the D.H. Conley High School track team and Revelation Peak Performance. In his free time, Joseph enjoys spending time with his family and assisting his mom in their family business.

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