



Black Educology Mixtape “Journal”

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://repository.usfca.edu/be/>

Cultivating an Environment of Black J.O.Y. in Educational Settings

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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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Dr. Kamshia Childs

ABSTRACT

Jubilantly creating
Opportunities and possibilities to be
You...authentically and unapologetically.

This track focuses on creating and facilitating an environment of Black Joy within educational environments—particularly those environments that have not always been welcoming, affirming, or equitable. The track will first seek to explore current research and literature about Black Joy in schools, and then share strategies and curriculum ideas that promote authentic experiences with learning inside and outside of the classroom. The track closes with 29 tips that promote the uplifting and amplification of Black voices and the Black experience within education.

Being Jubilant: What is Black Joy as it Relates to Education?

Joy is often associated with happiness and freedom—but it has not always been that way. Joseph (2020) states, “We must also allow ourselves to be rebelliously joyous. Where society has told us to ‘be quiet,’ and that we’re ‘too loud’ and ‘too different,’ it is an act of resistance to revel in the joy that they have spent much of history trying to take away from us” (para. 4). Going back in history, slavery took away joy and freedoms for Blacks, and even once slavery was abolished, “joy” and “freedom” were still not terms that were associated with the Black experience. At present, Black joy has become a movement to inspire, give hope, highlight, uplift, and take note of. It has become a force to take note of, and a walk of pride.

When it comes to Black joy in children and in schools, the educational system has not created a curriculum that has been centered on joy in general, let alone centered on Black joy. Griffiths (2012) states that if education is supposed to be such a great experience and equalizer, “we educators should indeed be thinking [about] what we are doing in education to find hope, love, rejoicing and joy” (p. 666). There have been pitfalls in the education system that have stifled the joy of the brightest Black students, many stemming from the inequities of a system racially and financially divided. For over a century, Black students have shown up to school systems that, when originally created, were never intended for them. Their ancestors were given tests to determine whether they were “fit” to do regular activities, or even to have rights, such as the right to vote. Or perhaps they were kept out of schools or denied the right to apply because the color of their skin was thought to mean they were inherently inferior. Today, while some students battle curriculum and testing bias, others fear for their safety and security—in spaces where they are supposed to feel alive and at home.

Black joy is difficult to encompass within a single definition, and Tichavakunda (2022) states, “There is no one-size-fits-all solution for campus life to meet Black students’ social needs. But the work starts with centering Black student life and Black students’ voices” (p.55). For educators and researchers who work in a system of standards and standardization, it is a bit frustrating that there is not a sole definition of “Black joy.” However, it is promising in the sense that if the “joy” is instilled and given the necessary attention and focus, it allows students to be bold, to be confident, and to preserve their sense of self. Black joy promises a child the chance to be seen and heard. Black joy provides enlightenment through authenticity and innocence. Black joy will create classrooms of innovation and elaboration. Fostering Black joy in classroom environments will give teachers the ability to embrace a culture that is unique and forever reinventing itself.

Black students need educational experiences in which they don’t have to worry about being stereotyped—where they and their fictive kin feel welcomed—and a place where they can smile and laugh without consequence. “Black children’s first encounters with racism can start before they are even in school, and Black teenagers report experiencing an average of five instances of racial discrimination per day” (Ma, 2023; English et al., 2019). Fostering Black joy in education will develop opportunities to build relationships and hopefully work to

remove doubts, fears, and even stereotypes. Harnessing Black joy equips children with confidence and the tools for opportunities to impact their families, siblings, their future, and the possibilities to dream.

Teach the Opportunities and Possibilities

Black joy in schools should involve putting measures in place to create opportunities for students to feel safe. The notion of what feels safe is complicated, and it's a personal understanding. Black students already have compounding odds against them (poverty, family issues, violence, lack of access, etc.) in their communities, and then they still worry about whether they can go to school and be protected. Safety should include protecting students from outside factors, but there is also a significant amount of trauma for Black students that often comes from inside school settings. Feeling safe at school is what should be expected, but sadly, it is one of the variables that deter students from school altogether. While discussing building on the foundation of love, Dr. Bettina Love stated in an interview, "These babies have the capacity to put in whatever you put in them, but it's really about can we get them there feeling safe, feeling loved, feeling encouraged, emotionally and socially ready to learn" (Williams-Johnson, 2016, p.5).

Safety not only comes in having the feeling of being physically safe, it involves feeling a sense of belonging and collective buy-in. Educators play a huge part in the safety net that is built within the learning environment. Educators in the nation's public schools are 80% white—identified in the data as non-persons of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Due to this disconnect, it is often a challenge to find teachers with the time and willingness to make the connections and bonds that are needed to create and recognize Black joy.

Imposter syndrome frequents the Black experience when trying to navigate in new careers and unfamiliar and underrepresented spaces (Roberson, 2021; Reyes, 2020; Hill, 2020; Coleman, 2022). Black Joy should create opportunities for students to dream of the possibilities so that imposter syndrome can be combated. An example of this is that students need to be exposed to knowledge about careers in which Black professionals are underrepresented, such as STEM fields, teacher education, architecture, and higher education. When being equipped with this knowledge, students need to also be given advice and shown examples of pathways to achieve their goals—while still in elementary school—as so often these students have such big dreams that they will need time to prepare. Students need to see and hear from those who are currently walking the paths that they long to travel. These are the foundational connections that students need to carry with them to build a supportive network and internal fortitude. Heidelberg et al. (2022) suggest mentoring programs built on Afrocentrism that explore students' historic roots and mentors who share positive characteristics with the students. They need mentors who look like them, who have journeyed like them, who understand the pursuit of breaking glass ceilings—not just mentors who show up during structured time, but those who can be embedded into their lives and their communities.

An educator concerned with Black joy needs to be culturally responsive and aware. Not only should Black Joy be celebrated with Black students, but other demographics need to understand (beyond such celebrations) how Black joy contributes to a deeper knowledge and understanding for all teachers, leaders, and families in their setting.

Authentic and Unapologetic Curriculum

Curriculum in education is the map that navigates the educator through the facilitation of knowledge. It is the map that is intended to give all students an opportunity to master concepts and skills. However, curricula that are created for schools and districts don't often take in mind the unique set of skills and talents that Black students bring. Nor do these curricula consider the challenges that Black students and their communities deal with.

Authenticity in the Black community is a way in which respect is earned. To "keep it real" or "keep it 100" is to make oneself trustworthy and valid. Students in schools know when they are truly valued and cared for, and they can identify this from a young age. Joy is cultivated and takes growth (like a plant). To disperse elements of Black Joy into teaching and learning, students need a curriculum that shares history beyond slavery, and when slavery is mentioned, the historical aspects and events should be accurate. It is often thought that students cannot handle tough topics and conversations, but honesty and transparency are respected and relevant in Black culture—besides, tough topics and conversations (racism, police brutality, community violence) are already commonly taking place within the Black community for children, beginning at young ages.

Teaching an authentic curriculum involves connecting with the audience and being a link to the real world, especially students' environments. In order to facilitate an environment that spreads Black joy, the students must see what Black joy looks like through art, literacy, music, film, fashion, dance, sports, and real-life scenarios and stories

that are weaved in their curricula. When reading, students need to be exposed to new and less common literary materials, such as comics and graphic novels. Though this medium is not traditionally filled with Black creators, it is one that will allow students to see various stories, settings, and writing styles. These students should be able to see themselves as not only writers, but authors, and finding rarely used literature can spark the creativity to enable them to do so. In mathematics and science, Black students should be exposed to the contributions of Black mathematicians and scientists. They should be challenged to use math in relevant ways (money, cooking, sports statistics, shopping, etc.), and encouraged with examples of Black inventors who have shaped and built the country's major infrastructures and created many modern-day necessities.

Authentic curricula provide opportunities for learning that is engaging, personalized, and innovative. Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) refer to this authentic approach as “intellectually powerful curriculum,” and it should involve engagement from educators, parents, and advocates who support work with higher order thinking, as well as those that confront “the mechanisms used to deny access” to quality learning experiences (p. 293). Through curriculum and instruction, educators must be unapologetic in bringing out a joy that should already exist.

Conclusion

Those educating Black students must be willing to accept the challenge of creating joyous experiences and accept that the Black experience in schools is not always the same as their peers'. These joyous experiences can positively fuel a generation that becomes unapologetic for who they are, and what they bring to a classroom. Joy is not usually looked at as a shameful emotion, however, people take offense when it is associated with Blackness. Black Joy is a smile or a laugh, Black Joy is safety, Black Joy is fearless, and Black Joy can be a weapon that lights up and enhances the world.

Hold Up...Wait a Minute!

Within this track, there was a common thread shared about the uniqueness of the Black experience and significance of Black joy being introduced to classroom settings. Below you will find 29 Ways and Days to Create Black Joy in Classrooms. The tips shared contain elements of Black culture (popular culture, shared culture) and fuse them with what can support and bring out Black joy. The significance of 29 days is that when studying Black History or culture it often takes place during February, where there are typically 28 days in the month (unless it is a leap year). The additional day is added as a reminder to go beyond February when planning to honor and acknowledge Black culture in classrooms and schools. Black joy should be enriched and cherished year-round.

29 Ways and Days to Create Black Joy in Classrooms

- **Day 1—Show Love Longer Than February:** Discuss their history (personal and cultural) and value beyond Black History Month. Black joy deserves to be present for more than just one month.
- **Day 2—Curriculum and Resource Check:** Ensure that Black culture is seen and represented in your classroom materials. Check your curriculum and classroom resources. Do your materials represent black students within your classrooms? And those not in your classroom? Remember, Black culture is not just in the United States, and it didn't begin with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks.
- **Day 3—Art is the Heart:** Introduce students to Black art by showcasing and sharing their art and artists in your classroom spaces. Black artists are all over the world, and in the digital space--there is no excuse to not share and highlight Black art.
- **Day 4—What Had Happened Was...:** Let students share their voice and lived experiences through storytelling and writing. Black students often are silenced in their settings because they are often taught to be seen and not heard at home.
- **Day 5—What'chu Say?:** Discuss and recognize how students come to schools with Black dialects, and slang is used to explore and often simplify language. Allow them to discuss current terms that are often new forms of language, which can go unrecognized due to them being misunderstood as misuse of standard or “proper” English.
- **Day 6—More Than Proud:** Create (as an educator) and share affirmations (and have students create affirmations) that promote love of Black culture and unique circumstances and pride that comes with being Black.

- **Day 7—Play MY SONG!** Music is often a staple in Black households, on commutes, at important events, and of religious significance. If appropriate, find ways to play their “song.” Invite students to explore “their song” and even create new ones.
- **Day 8—Share the Possibilities:** Let students know the possibilities of their future by exposing them to careers beyond their current environment and fields in which Blacks are underrepresented.
- **Day 9—Get to Know Ma, Dad, Granny, and Paw-Paw:** Establish genuine and meaningful relationships with the adults that Black students spend lots of their time with—don’t just call on them for discipline issues. They need to know that they matter in the success of their student as well.
- **Day 10—The ‘Fit:** Black culture is often celebrated through the uniqueness of clothing and style. Know that a students’ “Sunday Best” might not be your definition of “best,” but it is to them and their home adults. Understand students often bring/wear their version of “best” with them to school. Discuss it with them, infuse it into readings and media sections, showcase it, and even have students design fashion. A simple thing as style is so important to the culture.
- **Day 11—Keep It Real:** Don’t fake it—be authentic in who you are as a person and as a teacher. Trust cannot be built very easily if you as an educator cannot be transparent or if you cannot be who you are. Be transparent about who you are, your academic (and non-academic) journey, and any biases, strengths, weaknesses, and talents you have.
- **Day 12—Get Your Shine:** Teach students about the achievements of Blacks who came before them (famous and non-famous). In seeing the greatness that came before, it is hoped that it will spark curiosity, ambition, and joy.
- **Day 13—The Power of the Pen:** Let students write—to help them find their voice and to build student agency. Share the importance of writing and its reach—this reach can be through media, authorship, music, or other avenues.
- **Day 14—Hair Is a Statement:** Know that hair can be important to Black culture. Hair often speaks before an individual opens their mouth. It is a statement, it can be distinctive, and is often a way that Black culture forms bonds. Black hair can also have negative feelings—there are now many resources (books, songs, etc.) and even laws that protect the freedoms that hair brings, which so often are frowned upon. We cannot speak on Black joy without knowing the value, respect, and versatility of hair—and our students will bring a wide range of creativity and flair with their style of hair. Celebrate the kinks, coils, curls, fades, locs, braids, and more to center students’ Black joy!
- **Day 15—Look in the Mirror:** Black students often study so many other topics, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Allow opportunities for self-reflection and provide introspective journeys when planning assignments and lessons.
- **Day 16—Show Them How to Grow:** Promote a growth mindset within the classroom. Show students what they can do and give them tools and resources to cope when they are feeling vulnerable or defeated.
- **Day 17—School’s in Session:** Let your students teach (and learn) about what they are passionate about. The classroom is often filled with bias and one-sided beliefs. Allow the opportunity for students to demonstrate their knowledge and ask questions about their learning.
- **Day 18—Game Recognize Game:** Spread joy by recognizing the talents that each student brings to the classroom. They often don’t see them or think of their abilities as talents. It often just takes one seed planted for students to go far beyond their own expectations.
- **Day 19—Don’t Just Congratulate, Celebrate!** Incorporate and recognize culturally significant events and holidays within the classroom setting—these events include current and past historical events, and holidays that might not be on traditional calendars.
- **Day 20—The Door Is Open:** Encourage students to have open communication with all stakeholders in the learning setting, and gently yet respectfully welcome fictive kin relationships to the classroom. Don’t be afraid to break down the walls of sometimes years of mistrust in the education system.
- **Day 21—Health is Wealth:** Encourage students to take care of their mental health. Black joy in students cannot be facilitated if they do not know what joy is or have not seen it in a classroom before.
- **Day 22—Check Up on Me:** Provide space and time for recognizing grief, trauma, and inequities that Black students will bring to the learning setting.
- **Day 23—Pass the Mic:** Provide opportunities for students to speak on issues that are current to them inside and outside of school. Students often provide inspiration for lessons and curriculum and educators often fail to hear them. Let them speak!

- **Day 24—Smile for Me:** Provide students with the opportunity to laugh, smile, play, and enjoy what they are learning. Learning new things doesn't have to always be so heavy and serious.
- **Day 25—Hustle Hard:** Teach students the value of their ideas and the importance of pursuing their creative visions. Elements of entrepreneurship can begin to be taught at a young age— with their fresh, un-filtered perspectives, and brilliant imagination, children often dream of possibilities far beyond.
- **Day 26—Shoot for Beyond MVP:** Black children often dream of dominating in sports, but their dreams consist of just “making it to the league” (whether it be professional basketball, football, or other sports). Let them study sports beyond being a champion. Don't kill their dreams—share what it takes to train, what does sacrifice mean, and instill tools and skills in them to lead and transform all that they take on.
- **Day 27—Who's First?:** Teach students that they can be leaders and the “first” in many aspects of their life (ex. first to go to college, first to become a particular profession, the first to invent/discover, etc.).
- **Day 28—Is it Safe to Come In?:** Provide a safe classroom space to learn, and a safe space for students to be who they are. This takes time to cultivate, but it begins with providing a physical space that is welcoming and an educator who cares. The space should reflect them and their work as well. Safe spaces can be shaped with communication, discussions, empathy, and accountability.
- **Day 29—Remix!!! Change It Up:** Over the years, within Black culture, music is often remade, sampled, or remixed to make songs better, or to put a new touch on it, or to introduce it to a new generation. You better not remake a classic if your talent is not up to par, and remixes are often better than the original song—as they add new tempos, new artists, and new lyrics. Traditionally, Black music genres have evolved and played off each other. Understand that Black culture often does and will change (sometimes quickly). To create a chorus of “joy” it is crucial that we are willing to evolve, learn, adapt, and support new aspects of Black culture that impact students. Keep up and don't be afraid to change it up!

Disclosure Statement

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

Notes on Contributor

Dr. Kamshia Childs, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University-Commerce, where she teaches curriculum and literacy courses, and works with pre-service educators. She obtained an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas, and holds a B.S. in Elementary Education (ESL) and M.S. in Curriculum and Instruction (Reading and Language Arts) from Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. Dr. Childs has been a literacy educator for over 20 years and has worked in both urban and rural settings in K-12, and higher education. Dr. Childs was awarded the Dr. Chuck Arize Junior Faculty Award in 2021 from the Texas A & M University-Commerce Faculty Senate and Texas Association of Black Personnel in Higher Education, and nominated for an Outstanding ILA Teacher Educator award in 2023. She has published several literacy and multicultural education articles in peer-reviewed literacy journals, written a self-published book, contributed to books, has an in-press children's book, and presents at various state, national, and international conferences on topics related to literacy, literacy engagement, digital literacies, educator empowerment, parent involvement, and culturally relevant pedagogy.

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