

Dreaming Beyond Boundaries:

Reimagining the Role of Black Mothers in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

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Abstract

Black women have historically informed educational theory and practice. As Black women who have been nurtured and sustained by Black women's educational leadership both inside and outside the home, and who mother and "othermother" Black children, we seek to recognize and honor the labor of Black women. *Motherwork*, a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins, refers to the "reproductive labor" that women of color engage in to ensure the survival of family, community, and self. Black women center their motherwork on Black children by asserting their knowledge and experiences as related to teaching and learning. In this paper, we explore Black mothering as culturally sustaining pedagogy. We also reimagine and dream about our Black children's possibilities for learning. Through this work, we seek to center Black mothers as knowledge bearers and guides for building and sustaining Black children's brilliance and culture. We contend that Black mothering should be of foremost consideration in developing culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Keywords: Black mothering, culturally sustaining pedagogy, motherwork

Introduction

Historically, Black women have modeled how to teach students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds effectively, including Black and Brown students (Dillard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000, 2005; McKinney de Royston, 2020; Muhammad et al., 2020). Moreover, Black women have been the guiding lights in educational theory, often bridging the gap between critical theory and educational practice. Black women such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, Linda Darling-Hammond, Lisa Delpit, and Geneva Gay have left an indelible mark on teacher education, and on the field of education more broadly. Ladson-Billings, for instance, with William Tate (1995), is credited with introducing critical race theory (CRT) in the field of education. Among her many achievements and contributions as a scholar, Ladson-Billings (1995) is responsible for conceptualizing culturally relevant pedagogy, which today is a foundational framework in the field of teacher education (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017; Seriki & Brown, 2017). Scholar Gay (2018) introduced culturally responsive teaching to inform teaching practice for all students, particularly minoritized students. Culturally relevant teaching and culturally responsive pedagogy are both examples of pedagogical and theoretical frameworks born by Black women that have shaped and informed educational theory and practice. Nevertheless, teacher education remains a largely white domain in terms of both the teaching population and the lauded theorists.

In teacher education, Black theorists, and Black women specifically, are centered primarily in individual multicultural education courses, while white male theorists such as Vygotsky and Dewey are lauded as foundational thinkers in the field (Muhammad et al., 2020). Muhammed et al. (2020) have noted the many Black women who have been leaders in educational justice but have failed to be recognized suitably for their manifold contributions to the field. Black feminism and womanism, however, do acknowledge the power and tradition of Black women in education, by making a direct connection to home life (Dillard, 2006; Dillard & Neal, 2020). Dillard and Neal (2020) describe the care Black women educators give: "Students were embraced, supported, disciplined, and loved through the eyes and arms of a Black mother" (p. 375).

As Black women who have been nurtured and sustained by Black women's leadership in education both inside and outside the home, and who mother and "othermother" (see Wilson, 2010) Black children, we seek in this paper to recognize and honor the labor and expertise of Black women, especially Black mothers.

As Black m(other) scholars who have devoted our professional lives in the fields of education and counseling to dismantling racial, gendered, and other oppressions, the boundaries of our personal and professional lives are blurred. The coalescing of our work as university faculty members, educators, and Black mothers forces us to contend with how the work of Black women is often compartmentalized, and our mothering knowledge is pushed to the periphery. In this paper, we reimagine and dream about our Black children's possibilities for learning and seek to center Black mothers as knowledge bearers and guides for building and sustaining Black children's brilliance and culture.

Black Motherhood as Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

As noted above, Black women's scholarship has had a profound impact on shaping our understanding of how to teach Black children most effectively. In her pioneering book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) delineated the ideological and pedagogical underpinnings reflected in the successful teaching of Black children. This work was followed by another piece in which Ladson-Billings (1995) clearly delineated a theoretical framework for culturally relevant pedagogy. Drawing from this work, and the works of Gay (2000) and Paris (2012), has led us to consider how educators might move beyond being relevant and responsive to students' cultures to being more intentional about valuing and maintaining the cultural and linguistic traditions of minoritized communities, thereby sustaining these practices even as they morph and change. Paris (2012, p. 93) describes culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) as seeking to perpetuate and foster—that is, to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. She argues that, “in the face of current policies and practices that have the explicit goal of creating a monocultural and monolingual society, research and practice need equally explicit resistances that embrace cultural pluralism and cultural equality” (Paris, 2012, p.13).

We argue that what Paris describes as CSP is constitutive of Black mothering practices and, thus, Black mothering should be used to inform how educators conceptualize and engage in CSP. As the primary caregivers of Black children, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, sisters, and other-mothers play a central role in teaching them the values and skills that often are absent from their mainstream schools. If CSP is meant to sustain “linguistic, literate and cultural pluralism” (Paris, 2012) by drawing from students' home cultures, who better to inform that work than the individuals who regularly cultivate young people's growth in their homes. In Table 1, we outline the role of motherwork (Collins, 1994) as a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). We elaborate on these ideas by presenting vignettes that demonstrate how we experience the relationship between motherwork and CSP in our own lives, and concretely illustrate the central features of motherwork as CSP. Table 1 displays the correlation between motherwork and CSP.

Centering Black Mothers as Knowledge Bearers and Embracing Our Motherwork

Black mothers develop culturally sustaining practices through the socialization that results from their daily exposure and proximity to cultural practices; however, Black mothers also engage in more intentional educational practices with the explicit goal of sustaining their communities rich cultural practices. Jackson and Remillard (2005) broadly define education as “planned opportunities for learning, and consider the ways that parents [involve] themselves in these opportunities for their children” (p. 67), which is reflected in the “ways that parents work to structure, foster, and support their children's learning in a variety of contexts, not just those that are related to school” (p. 68). Chonika, for example, a second-generation American of Afro-Jamaican heritage, cultivates her children's use of Standard American English, African American English, and Jamaican Patois. Sustaining the languages and cultural traditions of one's communities involves using them regularly

TABLE 1. ALIGNMENT BETWEEN MOTHERWORK AND CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY

Motherwork (Collins, 1994)	Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017)	Motherwork as CSP
Motherwork as Survival: Black mothers see mothering as a commitment to the survival of Black children, and by extension the community and themselves.	CSP as Survival: By extending theories of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies, CSP argues for the need to sustain students’ cultural norms and values. In this way, it is a pedagogy of survival that ensures the longevity of Black and Brown people’s epistemologies.	The primary goal of Motherwork is to ensure the physical survival of Black children and their intact and healthy identities as Black people in a racist, anti-Black world. Motherwork promotes survival in the face of systemic physical dangers that threaten Black bodies, and also the “spirit murdering” that happens to Black children in mainstream institutions like schools (Love, 2019). <i>Example: Fostering educational experiences that build up rather than tear down our Black children; disrupting the sole use of summative assessments as the precursor for measuring growth and development.</i>
Motherwork as the Reclamation of Power: Motherwork helps Black children and communities gain agency through active means of resistance and empowerment.	Adapting to the Shifting Culture of Power: Young people must be culturally flexible and adapt to shifts in the culture of power. CSP supports the development of diverse cultural repertoires and access to power in evolving cultural spaces.	Motherwork reflects Black children’s need to maneuver through a variety of cultural spaces and to resist oppressive forces that insist on ethnocentrism at the exclusion of Black people and other minoritized groups. Motherwork also teaches Black children how to integrate their cultural norms and practices into mainstream spaces. <i>Example: Fostering linguistic diversity and flexibility with Jamaican American children, including Jamaican Patois in a U.S. school space.</i>
Motherwork and Identity: Motherwork is central to the development of the healthy coping mechanisms and identities Black children need to thrive and maintain a positive sense of humanity and personhood.	Grounding Identities in Equity: CSP recognizes those who have been damaged and had their identities erased through schooling. It recognizes that identities are ever evolving and critiques cultural practices that are not aligned with principles of equity while promoting those that advance equity.	Motherwork provides the foundation upon which Black children build their identities. This disrupts the ways that schools limit narratives of representation that allow Black children to see themselves, their histories, and ways of being as exceptional. <i>Example: Fostering positive racial and cultural identity development through representation and understanding the contributions of influential Black trailblazers.</i>

in the home and in community spaces. It also involves deliberately inhabiting spaces where those languages and cultural traditions are practiced, such as visiting other countries, attending local cultural festivals, and participating in local programs like the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools where African American English is used throughout the curriculum. When Chonika's children's school was making banners, each carrying the phrase "Make peace prevail on earth" in one of the languages represented at the school, she asked that they include one in Jamaican Patois. This was her way of bringing her own historically minoritized language into the mix, an example of how parents can broaden the range of languages deemed acceptable in the formal school context.

Chonika, whose middle-class Afro-Jamaican family resides in a majority white community due to career constraints, has few opportunities to speak African American English and Jamaican Patois in her children's school and other community spaces. For her to cultivate these aspects of her culture requires deliberate planning, but she knows that nurturing her children's language skills will enable them to navigate a variety of communities and to merge those communities and cultures when necessary. It also will help them build a sense of pride in their heritage and push back against deficit notions of minoritized languages. This type of home-based practice, like teachers in mainstream educational spaces who engage in CSP, helps students develop cultural competence, critical consciousness, and a positive sense of self, all of which have implications for Black children's overall well-being and academic success (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995). It is through these kinds of learning experiences that Chonika's daughter Chloe has come to recognize and articulate the need for justice, as she expresses in a piece of artwork painted in the colors of the Black Liberation Flag (see Figure 1). Without prompting, Chloe created her painting in the midst of a global pandemic, and in a time of numerous police shootings and extrajudicial killings of Black people. The *homeplace*, a term bell hooks (1990) coined to describe the protective spaces Black women create in which Black children can experience joy and also grapple with the realities of being Black, is cultivated through motherwork. The homeplace provides a space for freedom of expression that can result in the kind of spontaneous artwork Chloe produced—her beckoning call for justice.

A term coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1994), *motherwork* is the "reproductive labor" that women of color engage in to ensure the survival of family, community, and self. As Black women embrace and embody various aspects of their motherwork, they must negotiate in and through spaces to protect their children and assert that their knowledge and experience are central to teaching and learning. As they negotiate "intersectional and institutional structures of patriarchy, sexism, anti-black woman and girl racism, and classism, and . . . strive for . . . [their] own and . . . [their] family's wellness" (Richardson, 2019, p. 25), Black mothers also serve as guiding lights in disrupting stereotypes about Black people.

Writing as the Black-m(other)-scholars of students who often attend predominantly white school districts, we share realities that require a deep connection to our motherwork. By centering our focus on motherwork, we facilitate the protection not only of our biological children but of Black children collectively, including those yet to come, that embraces the funds of knowledge stemming from Black mothers' work to re-envision the teaching, learning, and protection of Black children's minds and bodies.

Although parents play a crucial role in their children's education and often are the most knowledgeable about their own children, Black parents are rarely included in the decision-making concerning the education system (Cooper, 2009; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Powell & Coles, 2021; Williams et al., 2017). Moreover, when Black parents are included, it is often from a deficit perspective that positions Black parents as uncaring and apathetic about their children's education and schooling (Powell & Coles, 2021). Such deficit perspectives are further perpetuated by dominant stereotypes of Black mothers as "loud and uneducated" (Powell & Coles, 2021, p. 77), mammies, welfare queens, and sexually promiscuous (Collins, 2000). The origins of these stereotypes go back to the enslavement of Africans in the Americas when caricatures of Black women were socially constructed as a way to control and maintain the subordination of Black bodies (Collins, 2000; Richardson, 2019). In challenging these dominant narratives of Black mothers, Black feminists and womanists have long upheld the wisdom of Black mothers (Collins, 2000; Dillard & Neal, 2020). Much like

the erasure of Black women's contributions to the field of education, Black mothers are not valued for their knowledge about teaching Black children. Even though Black women have contributed tremendously to the field of education, how their contributions connect to their Black mothering and motherwork (Collins, 1994) has yet to be fully recognized.

Black children have been situated historically and presently at the core of oppressive systemic and structural realities. Love (2019) posits that the “education survival complex” has taken on various forms, including test-taking requirements, grit labs¹, and character-education models. Black and Brown children must navigate these structures, which perpetuate rather than ameliorate educational disparities. The realities of the survival complex require a level of engagement from Black mothers that involves intentional, thoughtful, intense, and emotional racial socialization to combat the implications of systemic and structural barriers in schooling spaces (Adams-Bass & Coleman-King, 2020; Collins, 1994; O'Reilly, 2004). The oppressive ideologies at work in public school systems across this country are reflected in “colorblind” educators who fail to acknowledge white privilege and remain unaware of the prevalence and effects of discriminatory practices that directly harm Black families (Cooper, 2010).

Despite these obstacles, Black mothers have found ways to connect with and support each other, even during the schooling realities resulting from COVID-19, and to create and sustain communities in which Black and Brown children feel loved, protected, and understood. In environments where Black children might be perceived as threats or expendable misfits who are not core members of the community, Black mothers must think strategically about how to protect their children from the weight of existing in a system not built with them in mind. These tensions are also reflected in what is deemed “developmentally appropriate” in educational spaces as early as pre-K. This misunderstanding of Black children becomes a point of contention in navigating the overwhelming emphasis on test-taking and summative forms of assessment even as early as kindergarten. Black boys, in particular, have been, and continue to be, misunderstood in PreK-20 classrooms. Educators often misconstrue their learning styles and social skills as problematic when, in fact, Black boys are simply not receiving forms of discipline, academic instruction, and peer-interaction opportunities that suit their learning needs (Skiba et al., 2011).

Taryrn reflects on an experience with her six-year-old son, who had just received his first graded math assignment since beginning face-to-face instruction in the kindergarten classroom:

Son: *I guess I am not smart or too good at math since I didn't score well on my math test.*

Taryrn: *Son, you are smart, you are brilliant, and a test score doesn't dictate your intelligence.*

At this moment, Taryrn's motherwork was challenged, as an individually orchestrated school test had shaken the bold confidence her son had shown just a few weeks earlier when he first entered the classroom. In just a matter of weeks, the reality of Taryrn's six-year-old son's schooling experiences had become apparent. It was clear that rigid testing and a didactic curriculum were inhibiting his natural proclivities and leaving little time for how young children learn best—through hands-on experimentation and play.

As a teacher educator and mother-scholar, Taryrn understands children's need to sustain their natural connection to learning through play, and she has relied on that knowledge to guide her embodied motherwork. Dreaming about Black children's teaching and learning realities confronts significant tensions in common assessment strategies of even our youngest minds, which often resemble high-stakes testing that saps ingenuity, creativity, and active learning from K-12 schooling spaces. Embodied motherwork involves dreaming of spaces where conscious and informed teachers observe Black and Brown children, engage them, and analyze their work in formative ways. This is the type of learning space Taryrn envisions for her child and all Black children—a space that centers, sustains, and taps into the brilliance and creativity of our youth. Taryrn shared another experience that took place during her morning drive to school with her son. In this brief but intimate time, Taryrn was reading pages from the book *28 Days: Moments in Black History that Changed the World*, by Charles R. Smith Jr. This made the ride to school an opportunity for her son

to learn about influential figures in African American history, including Crispus Attucks, the first man killed in the Boston Massacre, which helped to spark the Revolutionary War, to Madame C. J. Walker who, after years of adversity, became the wealthiest Black woman in the country. During these morning rides, Taryrn read her son these stories of Black resilience and engaged him in conversations about the extraordinary contributions made by Black people.

A couple of weeks after Black History Month, Taryrn's son, who had secretly been working on a unique art project, presented his interpretation of *28 Days: Moments in Black History that Changed the World*. In his illustrated book, he reimagined the images from the original and captioned them using information he had learned about each key figure. Taryrn listened in awe as he read each of the pages and described the likes of Malcolm X, Althea Gibson, Matthew Henson, Daniel Hale Williams, and Martin Luther King Jr. His illustrations captured the very essence of how he felt learning about historical figures that looked like him. Taryrn's son's use of language also demonstrated his understanding of civil protest and of the challenges many of those he learned about had had to face as they made their marks in history. In fact, emboldened by these role models, he asserted to her that policymakers needed to "change the [rules] of the bus" so that everyone could sit where they pleased (see Figure 2). Through his mother's embodied motherwork, Taryrn's son was able to see himself on the shoulders of the giants that he had learned about during their rides together, and he learned to see himself as a creative and visionary author who, at six years old, drafted his own version of an important text.

Taryrn's embodied motherwork enabled her to cultivate and sustain a space in which the possibilities for her son are endless. By dreaming of and creating opportunities and spaces that enable him not only to survive but to thrive, she had tapped into the highest form of learning. A space that makes way for creation in its most organic and natural sense allows children to be true to who they are in the most affirming way. Creating this kind of space centers Taryrn's motherwork as CSP.

A Black Mother's Resistance and Future Dreaming

In centering our motherwork, and the intense realities of deeply rooted marginalization that Black children contend with in traditional schooling spaces dominated by Whites, Black mothers have embraced the practice of homeschooling as a form of resistance, protection, and what we suggest in this work is a form of Afrofuturism, imagining and creating a reality for Black people beyond what currently exists (Capers, 2019; Hill, 2000). Amid the realities of COVID-19, and in light of the longstanding disconnect between Black students and their K-12 schooling, many Black mothers are reimagining the possibilities for their children's learning, digital instruction in particular. This reimagining explores possibilities for centering learning that serves as an act of affirmation while simultaneously disrupting systemic racism embedded in today's schools (Fields-Smith, 2009). In the current realities, motherwork has guided opportunities to create new social networking spaces that will enhance bonds and promote collaborative teaching and learning among Black parents and families that have used the homeplace as a space where Black children can thrive. It also enables Black mothers to channel the narratives and histories of Black people in a way that demonstrates for their children the lineage and the shoulders they stand on in their own learner identities. The envisioned possibilities driving the motherwork of Black women are enabling them to create new opportunities for teaching and learning.

Structuring an education system that operates from a space that affirms Black children's intelligence and their right to be in the world will require an expansive reimagining. Dreaming of a space in which our children feel safe must harken back to the voices that dreamed of safety as Black families strove to gain their freedom. We must keep an ear open to the voices that have supported us as we consider the future of Black education (Warren & Coles, 2020), including a pedagogy that does not continuously harm Black children (Dumas, 2014). Creating an education system that is culturally responsive, affirming, and sustaining will require dreaming of a space that counters the deficit stereotype and promotes the physical, psychological, and educational safety of Black children. These dreams will have to expand beyond present-day frameworks that position Black children as outsiders within and beyond the formal K-12 schooling experience (Capers, 2019; Daniel et

al., 2020; Warren & Coles, 2020). Structuring such places will call upon all educators to share the dream, for the sake of the very survival of Black children.

Daniel et al. (2020) describe the utility, implementation, and education of the community school movement in New York City as envisioned by those who are most harmed by existing policies and practices.² They posit that the dreams of those who have been harmed include an invitation to families and communities of color to both imagine and serve as the leaders of these school systems. Steps forward will include forming what Bryan et al. (2020) define as school-family-community partnerships. These partnerships are an extension of models that have been guided forward by the imaginings and visions of Black mothers, who are often at the center of resistance and exhibit a will to stay the course for our children's education, even as stories of the harm done to Blacks continue. These stories are rooted in and reflect the history of racial segregation and limited access to educational resources in the United States (Baker, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Massey, 2016; Monarrez et al., 2019). Shaping the hopes and dreams for the future of our Black children requires knowledge of where we have been, awareness of current barriers, and the audacity to shape a freer future (Capers, 2019). Creating safe school spaces that are culturally responsive and sustaining will require that Black families and communities serve as leaders in all of those spaces.

The steps we take moving forward will require grappling with the past and the future in ways that both affirm and strengthen our Black children's personhood and educational possibilities. Taking action will require leadership that counters the deficit narratives that have harmed and continue to harm Black children in the schools (Dumas, 2014). This work will require us to bear witness to the realities Black children face in the current educational system, to dream of better possibilities, and to use our agency to resist schooling that reinforces the status quo. To create culturally sustaining spaces, we will have to explore what safety means for the children and communities most seriously harmed by systemic injustice (Daniel et al., 2020). Black women's motherwork should be the cornerstone of such efforts to practice CSP. Through the work of Black mothers, and the communities we represent, we are empowered to dream of and embrace practices that support education spaces that are safe and equitable for Black children.

Endnotes

¹ Grit Labs

² The community school movement values the strength and knowledge of survivors of oppression and supports collaboration between community stakeholders, educators, organizers, and students, blurring the lines between school and community.

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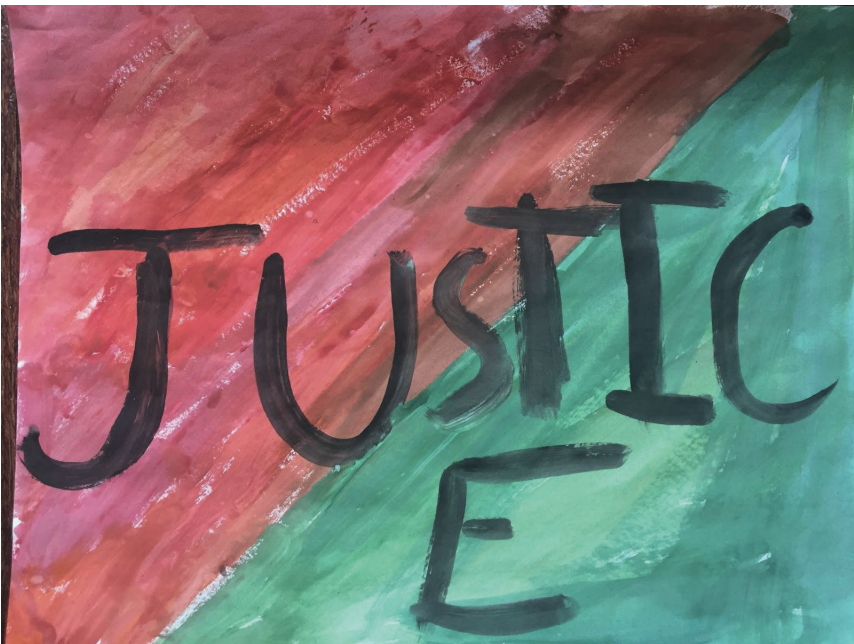


FIGURE 1.
"BLACK
LIBERATION"
- CHLOE KING,
AGE 8

FIGURE 2.
**"CHANGE THE
 [RULES] OF THE
 BUS" - DORIAN
 BROWN, AGE 6**



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