

# “I Don’t Know If the Plane Has Really Landed”: Flanbwayan Members on the Challenges, Omissions, and Potential of Culturally Responsive, Sustaining Education in NYC Public Schools

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## Abstract

This interview centers the voices of four Black women of immigrant origin, all of them members of the Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project, a community-based organization formed 15 years ago in New York City to promote cultural pride and biliteracy in newcomer youth. In this paper, two administrators and two youth participants are in conversation with each other as they reflect on their cross-generational experiences with culturally responsive and sustaining education in schools, share models of welcoming and culturally sustaining school cultures, and offer advice to educators on the types of dispositions and knowledge required to implement this education model with fidelity. They share the particular challenges they experienced as emergent bilingual students in their online learning classes, their concerns for the remainder of the year, and their hopes for the future.

**Keywords:** immigrant students, community-based organization, Haitian, emergent bilingual students, culturally responsive education

## Introduction

New York City is a place of astounding human diversity, where one can dine on a host of international cuisines; hear, see, and speak languages from nearly every linguistic family; and find community organizations that are key to fostering belonging and supporting young people in navigating this space. The Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project is one of these organizations that is most effective at building bridges, advocating for social change, and empowering youth to seize the day and have their voices heard. As a community organization that partners with a range of schools, school agencies, and other groups, Flanbwayan has a unique view into the education landscape in New York City, both within and beyond its public schools. In the 2020-2021 school year, the student population was 16% Asian, 25% Black, 40% Hispanic, 3% Multiracial, and 15% White. Twelve percent were classified as English language learners (to whom I refer emergent bilingual), and 20% were classified as students with disabilities (New York City Department of Education, n.d.).

The city’s diversity has been an asset and a source of tension in the schools, where no one ethno-racial group has a majority and the diversity within panethnic and racial groups is often unrecognized. Community-based education groups like Flanbwayan and its members can offer educators much-needed insights into how to actualize a culturally responsive and sustaining education (CRSE) framework most effectively. The CRSE framework’s four grounding principles are “(1) welcoming and affirming environment, (2) high expectations and rigorous instruction, (3) inclusive curriculum and assessment, and (4) ongoing professional learning”<sup>1</sup>.

In an interview conducted on Zoom in June 2021, Flanbwayan members shared how these principles manifested, or did not, in their experiences as students and in their professional roles as youth advocates. They also envisioned what an ideal school environment looks and feels like when embracing the CRSE framework and why creating such an environment is vital to student success.



JAVONTE BOSTICE, 12TH GRADE

The following interview is a verbatim conversation, which is integral to highlighting the linguistic variation within communities and trains the listener to expand their repertoire. Edits have been made only when absolutely necessary to eliminate ambiguity. Participants' real names are used with permission.

**Interviewer:** So, thank you all for joining me this afternoon. I'm really, really looking forward to this conversation . . . So, I want you to tell me your name, your role in the organization, your grade, and also what motivated you to get involved.

**Kelitha:** Okay. I'm going to start. My name is Kelitha Nazaire. I'm a junior student. I am an outreach coordinator at Flanbwayan. My motivation is that Flanbwayan is like a big organization. They, like, give you opportunities as young women to share your thoughts and to also present your, like, qualifications. It's been three years, and I am happy to join Flanbwayan.

**Stafy:** My name is Stafy Jean-Louis. I'm a junior in high school, at James Madison High School. I've been part of Flanbwayan for three years, too. I'm a member who takes part in activities at Flanbwayan such as dance group, girls' group. And what motivated me to apply was that I could get help regarding school stuff, and I really wanted to join the dance group. So yeah, that's what got me to be involved at Flanbwayan.

**Nancie:** I'm Nancie Adolphe. I'm the campaign manager at Flanbwayan. This is about my fifth year working at Flanbwayan. My reason for joining Flanbwayan is to be able to help students like myself when I came to this country. I also have the same similar background as the students. I was here, came from Haiti, went to high school here, and went to college here. So, I felt like when I was in high school, throughout my high school years, I had a lot of support from my school, especially from my surroundings. So, I think it's important for students, especially students in high school, to have those support, to be able to navigate, um, the high school system here, as well as just navigate life, especially as a new immigrant, someone new to this country. So, that's really my motivation for working at Flanbwayan, and to be able to be a voice for the students.

**Darnell:** Hi, I'm Darnell Benoit, the founder and director of Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project, and actually we're celebrating 15 years.<sup>2</sup> I've been a part of this for 15 years. It's like another baby, another child. But, just like Nancie, just like the students we work with in the community we work in, where I represent that population of students, I came here also in high school, then no English, felt a bit isolated where I grew up in Queens, and there wasn't anything . . . um, there wasn't anything like Flanbwayan in my community. And then also Kahdeidra, you're talking to like three different generations of Haitians, Haitian women here, which is great. I mean, I just turned 50, Nancie is in her thirties, and the girls are teens, 16 I think. So, you see the difference. When I came here in the eighties, there wasn't anything at all. So, I think that's why when I founded Flanbwayan, I thought of those ideas of what I had gone through as a teenager myself, not having the support in the community and in school, but having it at home and thinking about the students who don't have it at home and who don't have it in the school. How can a community organization really bridge that gap and connect? And that's exactly why I founded the organization in my community, so Haitian youth can connect with each other and connect to their community.

**Interviewer:** Thank you. Thank you all. I mean, I clearly, I hear your passion for the organization. So, um, this kind of leads to our second question. What's the most rewarding part of your involvement in this organization? So, what brings you the most joy in the work that you're doing? What makes you feel the most proud to be involved in this organization?

**Darnell:** For me, [inaudible] for me, it's an immigrant-serving organization, it's led by immigrants, and it's a space that not only young people but the community can come to feel welcomed. Somebody speaks your language; people understand your culture. That's so important today to have that, and when young people and their parents, when they walk into the organization, that they feel like home, that they can get answers to their questions. We all know that being a public school parent is not easy. Being a public school student is not easy. When all these challenges, you know, come up, then the community, parents, and students, they have a space to go to, to find answers and solutions.

**Nancie:** I think for me, um, some of the things that makes me happy to be at work is to see, um, like the student success. To see, you know, students, especially like you see how you were talking about your daughter, like, I'm sure Darnell remembers from when she first came and to see her now in college, to see the young woman that she has become. And I think for me, to me, that's the thing that I like to see. And knowing, you know, when the students first came here to see the growth in the students. That's, for me, it's very rewarding when I see that, and I see students, like even, you know, having Stafy and Kelitha in here. I remember I recruited them to come to Flanbwayan, so you will see why, you know, I'm happy to do the work that I'm doing.

**Kelitha:** The most rewarding part of my work is like, I appreciate how Flanbwayan opened the doors for me as young Haitian immigrants to come here, to not speak English as well, and to like feel comfortable to have like a space to share your thoughts, like share your ideas with others, and how, as a young Haitian woman, I can entertain other young Haitians to come participate, to like civil activities that we have, to make them feel comfortable, to make them feel like they have support in the U.S.

**Stafy:** For me, the most rewarding part will actually be the bond that we all share since we all come from like similar backgrounds, and we have similar experiences. Um, I feel a certain sense of like peace to know that, "Oh, she's just like me. He's just like me." And we all just became friends, and I really just enjoy the bond that we share.

**Interviewer:** And so, what I want you to do now is, I want you to just think back to if you remember your school doing anything to celebrate your ethnic or cultural background, if there's any particular memory that stands out to you. [Or], is there anything that your school is currently doing? Is there anything that your school is doing to celebrate your ethnic background, celebrate being Haitian or to celebrate being Caribbean?

**Darnell:** For me, who grew up here in the eighties, nothing whatsoever . . . I didn't miss much because my parents, my father had done a great job of that. So, coming in here in America, in the United States, like my own history, my own identity as a young Haitian woman, that was clear for me, of who I was and the history of my country. That was clear, but I didn't get the culture here. . . . Growing up in the eighties, there was a lot of, um, if you were Haitian, sometimes it was, students were afraid to say they were Haitian because there was a lot of bullying of Haitians back in the eighties in the schools. And then there was the HIV and AIDS situation, all that compiled with everything, so it was really, really hard to be Haitian, a Haitian student back in the eighties . . . but the school didn't celebrate anyone, even though we were all Black and Brown from different parts of the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup> There wasn't any celebration. . . . Even with all the bullying that the Haitian students were going through, because there was a big Haitian population, there was a big Jamaican, a big Trinidadian, and different Caribbean, like Guyanese and so forth. The school never did anything to really support the students, to really help us learn about each other. So, none of that happened for us, for me anyway.

**Kelitha:** Yeah. For me now, that goes to like [a] Black school, I don't see anything that is like matter really to my ethnicity. No parties, no celebrations, nothing. Nothing. I go to Clara Barton, Clara Barton High School. The only thing I'm gonna say like they did, is just like, um, when it's in March, like to inspire Black people, you can see like posters. They trying to fly posters, or they can have the student go to the auditorium having poem and stuff, but it's not really something that you see that as a Black woman, that you find yourself, like, it's like something that we celebrate as Black women that we need to be proud. I can say like, it's very low. Like some students trying to just like, all the . . . since we have to celebrate, like, because it's Black month history, but it's not really matter to them.

**Stafy:** For me, I go to a majority White school, but every single year we have, like, one day or one week where students could choose to make slides about, like, the country that they come from, share about, like, their food and their traditions. And I think it's a really good idea, but when no one pay attention to the slides, because it's just like on a screen, um, like on the side. So, no one really pays attention to it. So, I don't really know if that's really honoring because we make the slides, but not everyone pay attention to it. But yeah, my school has like a special day just for everybody to just

talk about like their ethnicity. It's every year. I think it's a week. Like, they just put the slides up for a week. Like you do the slides, and they put it up on a screen that when you come into the school, you can see the screen.

**Nancie:** For me, I went to Brooklyn International High School. So, my school was, it's part of—it's the schools that they specialize in students who are immigrant students. So, throughout our school, our cultural background or ethnicity is very, it's celebrated. ... When I was there, we didn't have that many Black or Brown teachers, but the school had a lot of things that could help us where I think some of the teachers either would speak another language. ... We have different activities throughout the year. We would have, um, feasts where people would share their ethnic food. We also had a big cultural festival where we all, everybody can show talent from their home country. So, it was celebrated. We all, we have, um, different clubs like Haitian club, Bengali club, Chinese club. So ... our culture and our ethnicity background was celebrated a lot in my school 'cause that was the specialty of our school.

**Interviewer:** Thank you. thank you all for sharing. ... So, um, in this issue ... the focus is on what we call culturally responsive and sustaining education, or CRSE, for the acronym. And it's defined as "centering, elevating, uplifting, and sustaining the lives, cultures, and communities of all students." That's how we define culturally responsive and sustaining education. It is education centered on "liberation and emancipation from the systemic ableist, racist, classist, patriarchal structures of White supremacy."<sup>4</sup> So, what, if anything, do you know about the Department of Education's (DOE) effort to promote culturally responsive and sustaining education in schools? Do you know anything about their efforts to do that?

**Darnell:** Yeah, for me, I know the efforts to promoting that, but I don't know if the plane has really landed in terms of, um, schools respecting and doing their best to connect the curriculum, to connect the students to that, the CRSE. I think it's something that's super important for the DOE to have decided to do, but with so many schools and so many different groups of students, I'm not sure that it has started. I'm not sure that schools are respecting it, and I'm not sure if students are getting it. From what I hear, I don't think so.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So now my question is, um, what are the main challenges ... you see to implementing CRSE in school? What are the challenges that you think, that you hear people are facing, or that you think may possibly be happening or why, you know, in Darnell's words, that "the plane hasn't really landed"? I love that metaphor.

**Darnell:** [Laughing] I know. Yeah, the challenges. The challenges are many. It's about changing our minds. It's about the system, right, changing, changing, and changing in many ways. ... I'd like to know, does each school have a plan? Have they had the training? Have they understood exactly, you know, what's going on? Do they know the population of students they work with? Because, because it is the public school, because it is 1.1 million students, and because there is such diversity in the school ... I'm curious, like, you know, schools have to get to know their communities. Okay, so if you have a community of Yemeni kids, then it's going to be your curriculum, and what you do with CRSE should be different than what a school is doing in East New York [Brooklyn] with a majority Black American, uh, African American kids. So, I think all that has to be dealt with, and I think it's difficult.

**Interviewer:** So what's important for teachers and principals and vice principals and everybody who works in the school with students, what do you think is important for them to know when they're planning their lessons? If they want to be—plan lessons that are culturally relevant and sustaining and that uplift your cultures, do you have any advice for them?

**Kelitha:** My advice is, I want them to be, like, more patient with immigrant kids. And also I want like for some teachers to like avoid stereotyping. And what I want, I want also teachers to be like trying to be more resourceful with students.

**Interviewer:** Hmm. Okay. Those are great. Kelitha, wait, I want—talk to us more about that. Can you explain more about what you mean by being more patient and also being more resourceful?

**Kelitha:** Okay. When I say being more patient, it's like some teachers, when you come here as an immigrant, you don't speak English, like [a] language barrier, it's like for them, it's not the same thing. They only teaching you what they only have to say, but it's like, as an immigrant student, I don't want to feel myself, like, left behind. I want the teacher to be, like, more patient with me, go over the stuff like multiple time until I get it. Because once you feel like you left behind, you will not be able to, like, focus in what the teacher said. You'll be feeling, like, isolated. And when I said resourceful, is like, even as a teacher, you don't speak English, you don't speak Kreyòl or French, I think they can try to, like, make research. Like use nonverbal communications for me as an immigrant student to know what the teacher is saying.

**Stafy:** Um, I definitely agree with Kelitha on patience because I was the perfect example. When I first came here, I did not know English, and they just put me in a normal class where we didn't have dual language, [a] dual language program where we have it only in seventh and eighth grade. So, I think it's very important for the school to know that not everybody will, like, be able to fully understand if they don't have, like, the resources that they need. And also I feel like they should be able to learn about the students and include, like, their cultural background in school. For example, like English, you could give books about the students' background. And I think this would just make, like, education more entertaining for students in general.

**Darnell:** Training is important for the teachers, for the school, for everyone, I mean, to be a team, to have like a school team where everyone is coming together, coming together and coming with ideas. And then it doesn't happen just in the English class, for example, it has to happen everywhere. It has to happen in history. It has to happen in science. It has to happen everywhere. There are many ways to have our students, Black and Brown kids with different backgrounds, different ethnicities, to fully be immersed and engaged in the work that's presented to them, for them to know about, you know, many people that can be for them, scientists that were Black and Brown that contributed and so forth. I think all that stuff is missing. And a lot of time it's the lack of um, you know, teachers don't want to do the work. And then on top of it, you have different immigrant populations. ... So there is a lot of that, where we're not taking the time, where the system doesn't take the time to get to know the students, and it's not something that takes time at all. I think, you know, the school communities should respect the students and do that at least.

**Nancie:** Yeah, I also, I'd like to add, I think especially in schools, I think it's important for . . . schools to partner with different groups, especially community organizations that are working with different students. So, there's a lot that they can learn from there and also finding out what is going on in the students' communities. Um, for example, in the Haitian communities, we've had a—like we've had a surge of students coming from, because a lot of people from Haiti have been going to Brazil, Chile, and then they come here, so you meet a Haitian student who speaks Spanish right now . . . they're so mesmerized by it, or they're so surprised, but if you knew you're serving Haitian students, the least you can do is find out what is going on in their community right now, what is affecting their community right now.

**Interviewer:** So, if you were in charge, what would your ideal CRSE curriculum, lesson event, or policy look like? If you were principal, or if you were a teacher and you were in charge, how would you teach or what would you teach?

**Kelitha:** Um, I will, I will try to have, like, more images to show them and also to make them, like, learning about every culture of, like, others, people that isn't the same, like the same peers, so that they know about, like, the culture to not feeling like stereotyping. And also, I will also have, like, such activities, multicultural activities, to make them feel comfortable, make them, like, trying to learn more about other countries.

**Stafy:** Um, for me, like when you ask the question, what would you teach? Like history just automatically came to my head because in history class, we learn about American history, well, obviously. But, and we also, like, they also mentioned Haitian history, but they don't really, like, go in depth into like other countries. Like I just, 'cause there's not only, like, Haitian and, like, American history. And I think other countries' histories should be more talked about 'cause if you ask me, I

wouldn't know what happened in other countries, like, I just wouldn't know. I would just know what they taught me in history class. And I just really think that they should think—they should talk about other countries.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. These are all really excellent, excellent ideas and points you make. ... So, in this current social and political climate with all these things happening, what's one thing that you are concerned about for the remainder of the school year? We're now in January. What's one thing that you're concerned about? And what's one thing that, despite everything going on, that you're looking forward to?

**Kelitha:** I'm looking forward, like, for a change, for young people as me, um, immigrants to find more support in school and also for, in school, to have like more, to learn more about like other cultures. And to be, like, to feel comfortable in your school, even you like go to a Caribbean school, to feel like you're learning a lot.

**Nancie:** I'm very concerned about kids, especially our students. I'm concerned that they're passing, like they're passing them because it's COVID, but ... I feel like they're going to be behind, um, academically. Like I'm really concerned about that because it was already like that without the pandemic, and I feel like with the pandemic, it's going to be even higher. So, I'm really worried about that. And one thing I'm looking forward to, I guess the new administration. We'll get a break from crazy Donald Trump. So, I think that I'm looking forward to just peace, less chaos.

**Darnell:** Yeah. Um, for me, I'm very concerned about what the pandemic has done to, not only our immigrant students, because they're the ones at the bottom of the pyramid, they struggle the most, and resources are always taken from there. But, I'm worried about all Black and Brown students that have, you know, the low graduation rates and so forth.<sup>5</sup> ... And then what I'm looking forward to is, um, the future. The pandemic is not here to stay. I'm hoping that we'll get a new chancellor, we get [a] new administration, not just administration from the country but for me, for the public schools. And we need to have more support for immigrant students that are struggling inside the public schools.

**Stafy:** Um, with the current social and political climate, one thing that I'm concerned about would be students' mental health, because a lot of people don't realize it, but actually some students take like comfort in school and like just socializing with their friends from like problems they might have like at home or like in a different community. So, I think that's one of the things I'm really worried about. And one thing I'm actually looking forward to is school opening back up because I might say that I like online school, but I think it's better, like, to be in school and actually learn the way that we used to. Because now, just like Ms. Nancie said, I feel like we don't really learn. We just do the work just to pass and have a good grade, and I don't think that's right. I'm just looking forward to school opening back up.

**Kelitha:** Yeah, I wanna add on what Stafy said. Yes, we don't really learn because now, thanks [to] remotely, you're just trying to finish it. You're just like, you want to get over it. You don't wanna, like, focus on it to learn. You just want to get over it and send it as, like, ASAP. But, I think even [though] that we remote, I think, like, they should, like, do something to entertain students. Or, have like some remote activities, and also give them more information, how they can do to find, like, scholarships online. Because now, things are remote, like people don't know anything at all. You're just trying to go online, use your computer for homework, but you don't know how to make research, how I can find like scholarships as a student, as a senior student, as a junior student, how I can get myself ready for SAT. Like having a forum for that. Even like schools doing town hall [meetings], I feel like they still, like, miss something. It's just not, like, really create[d] for students.

## Conclusion

Darnell, Nancie, Kelitha, and Stafy are four Haitian American women whose experiences in education span several decades, countries, and boroughs. Throughout the interview, I was struck by how insightful, critical, and nuanced their perspectives were. Transnational consciousness is a

theme that surfaces often, and educators who have global awareness are best equipped to implement the CSRE framework. In order to create a welcoming and affirming environment, educators must use multiple methods to gain knowledge about their students and the communities in which they teach. Stafy and Kelitha both expressed a desire for intellectual challenge and exposure to cultures beyond their own. Kelitha suggested a need for more support when conducting internet research for scholarships, and Stafy wanted to learn about history beyond Haiti and the United States. They are global citizens, and they are asking for an education that reflects their lived realities. Inclusive curricula and assessments account for individual students' strengths, needs, and learning preferences. Kelitha implored us to have more patience with immigrant students who are emergent bilingual, to adjust the pace of instruction to use nonverbal cues, and to offer multiple opportunities to impart learning—the latter of which is a core feature of universal design for learning. As we listen to their narratives, the imperative of adopting a CSRE framework for instruction is magnified. For educators undertaking this work, listening to the indispensable voices of students and community organizations, like Flanbwayan, is an important first step.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The framework is described on the New York State Department of Education website (<http://www.nysed.gov/crs/framework>)

<sup>2</sup> Flanbwayan marked its 15th anniversary in 2020. The organization was founded in 2005.

<sup>3</sup> From 1982 to 1985, U.S. scientists and the Centers for Disease Control circulated a list of four groups at high risk of HIV infection—known collectively as the 4H Club: hemophiliacs, heroin users, homosexuals, and Haitians. Overall, the scientific discourse blamed Haitians for bringing AIDS to the United States, and racist violence and discrimination against Haitians and Haitian Americans of all ages was widespread, especially in the metropolitan areas of New York City and Miami, Florida (Cohen, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> This definition of Culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) Education is provided on the New York State Education Department website (<http://www.nysed.gov/crs/framework>)

<sup>5</sup> In 2020, the four-year high school graduation rates for all students in New York City were 78.8% and 76.9% for August and June, respectively, an increase from 77.3% and 73.9% in 2019. The rates for English language learners were 45.7% and 42.5% in 2020, and the rates for Black students were 75.9% and 73.8% (New York City Department of Education, n.d.).

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