THERE ARE NO DEFICITS HERE

DISRUPTING ANTI-BLACKNESS IN EDUCATION

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Introduction

Discussing herein the mistakes made in the education of the Negro, the writer frankly admits he has committed some of these errors himself.

—Carter G. Woodson

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—James Baldwin

More time. More basic skills. More discipline. More social-emotional learning. More core content. More testing. More data. More grit. These are among some of the leading refrains about what is needed to improve the academic performance of students of color—Black students in particular—or to close the so-called "achievement gap." But essentially, all these refrains call for more of the same and assume our prevailing educational paradigm is sound. Give it a tweak here. A new program there. Add a little special sauce. Sprinkle a few data points on top. Voilà, a silver bullet.

The assumption that our educational system is good, just a little broken, has vexed me throughout my professional journey as an educator. Whether in the classroom, supporting school and district leaders, partnering with community-based organizations, working with aspiring school leaders, or developing initiatives at the municipal level, this assumption has dominated both outlooks about education and approaches to addressing the "savage inequalities" that persist at every level and in every aspect of our educational ecosystems. The foundation, the structure, and the roots remain unquestioned and unchallenged. And the resulting policies, programs, curricula, and reforms act more like trickle-down education than educational transformation. Maybe it's because we can't see the structure or the foundation of something that's been built. Or we can't see the roots once a seed has been planted. But I can see apartheid learning conditions. I can see curricula and textbooks. I can see pedagogy. I can see seating arrangements and discipline and suspensions. I can see parents and communities disregarded. I can see the evidence of the structure and the foundation and the roots on

the walls of classrooms, in the halls of schools, and in the eyes of Black students who feel unseen. I can see.

Education, literacy specifically, has always been valued in the lives of Black people. We have used it to name, navigate, contest, and fight against oppression and injustice in our lives and, at times, at great peril (Douglas, 2020; Muhammad, 2020; Perry et al., 2004). During Reconstruction, Black freedmen's organizations created and supported independent schools for Black children, which led the way toward universal education (Anderson, 1983). The desegregation of schools was central to the civil rights movement. In the 1970s, Black college students organized across college campuses for Black studies courses and campus diversity. Today, communities across the nation form coalitions, alliances, and build movements to demand educational opportunities for Black children and other children of color that are equitable, socially just, and culturally responsive and sustaining. But the failure of education reform to address the potency and saliency of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and other deficit beliefs that flow from society into our laws, policies, and practices and ultimately into our schools and classrooms persists. After so much reform, there has been so little change (Payne, 2013). An education system that is so inherently inequitable cannot be the "great equalizer" it is narrated to be.

My sister and I grew up surrounded by civil rights activists and social justice messages. My mother talked to us about her activism as a college student at Pennsylvania State University, where she belonged to a group of Black students who are responsible for the creation of the Paul Robeson Cultural Center at Penn State's University Park Campus in 1972. The students held protests, circulated petitions, and sat-in at the president's office to demand a space where Black students could gather to celebrate, affirm, and support Black history and issues. My mother never diminished the anger she and the other Black students felt about the lack of Black professors, the racist comments and lessons they encountered from white faculty, or the limited courses about Black history and culture available to them. But the pride with which she shared the outcomes of their demonstrations and meetings with campus administration also communicated the importance of acting. Sundays spent at Central United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, during the late 1970s and early 1980s reinforced these messages from my mother. As I child, I was in awe of Central's pastor, Dr. Joseph Lowery. You see, Dr. Lowery, a civil rights leader, preached unapologetic sermons about Black liberation and God being with those who fight for justice. His sermons taught me to see injustice and be committed to fight against it.

I can see that white supremacy and anti-Blackness produce toxic educational cultures that steal the belonging, purpose, pride, and joy that learning should give all students from Black students. Our system of education is saturated with anti-Black policies, content, and practices that create "survival" conditions and marginal learning opportunities that are unique to the experiences of Black students (Dumas, 2016). Black students—Black people—are not monolithic in America or anywhere in the world. "Racialized physical markers create common experiences of social marginalization" for Black students, families, and communities from all ethnic backgrounds (Hernández, 2022). We, of course, all have multiple and intersecting identities. Yet because living at the intersection of a Black racial identity powerfully impacts our experiences and outcomes in every sphere of social life, this book focuses on Black students—American born, African, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latino/a, and other Black students from the African diaspora.

The harmful educational experiences Black students endure make me angry. For a long time, I felt ashamed for my anger or, more precisely, the expressions of my anger that others felt should be tempered. Now, I affirm my anger and that of others who courageously refuse to participate passively in oppressive systems, structures, or practices. But as my mother, Dr. Lowery, and the lives of so many activists today convey—being angry is necessary but insufficient. So the question for me and the work we do as educators is, "How do we understand inequities in public education as the intended consequences of the anti-Blackness inherent in American society and collectively work toward emancipatory educational ecosystems designed for Black children to thrive?" This book is my attempt to address this question.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Part I begins the book with a reflection on the personal and professional context in which the ideas, theories, and frameworks I provide have developed. In Chapter 1, I situate my entry into education as the foundation for my thinking about classrooms, schools, and districts as ecosystems and the role of beliefs about Black students in their learning experiences. I introduce emancipatory educational ecosystems to help us reconceptualize our thinking about the education we provide to Black students. Chapter 2 turns to examples of efforts to transform education in Newark, New Jersey, that contribute to my belief that affirming beliefs and capacity for culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE) are needed to create learning that elicits the genius of Black students. In Chapter 3, I offer conscious collectivism—a

framework for the continuous partnership with all stakeholders to work together to intentionally create the emancipatory educational ecosystems Black students deserve.

After exploring the context in which my understanding evolved, Part II examines the collective context of our prevailing educational paradigm, what educational scholar Love (2019) calls the "educational survival complex." I consider the intersections of social systems and racial ideologies and Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological systems theory, a widely held explanation for the influence of the social environment on children and human development, and build on Jackson (2010) and Hammond's (2015) work about culture and the brain. Chapter 4 considers Covid-19 and the murder of George Floyd as examples of the racialized social dynamics that exist in our society and looks to ecosystems in nature to establish the understanding that ecosystems, including our society, are governed by general principles. In Chapter 5, I discuss Bronfenbrenner's ecological system framework and consider its limitations for understanding how race operates in our society and educational ecosystems. Chapter 6 examines the influence of culture on our educational ecosystems and draws from my teaching and high school experiences to provide examples of Love's conceptualization of the "educational survival complex." The relationship between our beliefs and actions and how beliefs operate in our subconscious and conscious thinking is examined in Chapter 7, where I offer a brief look at new neuroscience research that is beginning to illuminate specific interactions between culture and our brains.

Part III moves us into collective purpose, the pursuit of emancipatory educational ecosystems for educating Black students (and all students in general), which requires we develop affirming beliefs and the knowledge and skills to undertake culturally responsive-sustaining educational transformation (CRSET). Chapter 8 introduces affirming beliefs that can help move your ecosystem toward emancipatory educational ecosystems where learning is connected to the identities, cultures, histories, and communities of Black students. Chapter 9 draws from leaders in the field of culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE) and uses insights from a culturally responsive education pilot in a district I call Hilltop to demonstrate the importance of CRSET to an emancipatory educational ecosystem.

Included in the chapters are *Pause and Process* sections that offer you opportunities to reflect and engage individually and collectively with the ideas and content I present. Each *Pause and Process* section begins with *Individual Reflection* and moves into *Collective Planning*. This allows flexibility in how the sections are utilized. For example, if you are reading together

as a school, the *Individual Reflection* can be completed independently at home and the *Collectively Planning* during the PLC or other meeting time when you come together to discuss the book. The interaction of *Individual Reflection* and *Collective Planning* will support your personal awareness of your beliefs and practices while building understanding of your educational ecosystem as a whole. The *Pause and Process* sections in Part II will help you define your collective context. In Part III, the *Pause and Process* sections will help you begin thinking about your collective purpose. The appendix includes implementation exercises to help you go even further in your application.

This book is for anyone working in education, working in partnerships with schools, supporting children and families, and organizing to increase educational justice in schools and districts. The classrooms that teachers lead are ecosystems. Teachers can use this book to deepen their understanding of how their classroom culture, pedagogical practices, the individual worlds of their students and families, as well as their backgrounds contribute to the classroom as a whole. Principals can engage their schools in planning. This book will help superintendents to better support each school in their district as an individual ecosystem as well as to ensure the interactions between schools, between departments, and between the central office and every school work to build and reinforce beliefs, policies, practices, and content that can generate emancipatory educational ecosystems. It will also assist superintendents in situating their district within the ecosystem of the municipality and state where they are located to better marshal the assets and resources of the ecosystem to support the district. Community organizers might use the book as an advocacy and organizing tool while philanthropy and other external organizations or agencies will find the book helpful in situating themselves in relationship to schools and school districts and partnering better with them.

This book is not a guide or an instructional manual but a call to take seriously the significance of beliefs and culture in your work as an educator. It is my intent to propel you to examine the individual and systemic beliefs operating in your educational ecosystems and to unseat deficit beliefs, systems, policies, and practices that steal belonging, purpose, pride, and excitement from Black students. In so doing, I urge you and your educational ecosystem to take responsibility for building the capacity you need to move toward emancipatory educational ecosystems where affirming beliefs and CREST guide your work.

Finally, I hope that if and when you encounter resistance when interacting with ideas, concepts, or examples that challenge you, you will choose to work with any discomfort that arises and explore what your resistance may be communicating to you.