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**Putting Black Boys’ Literacies First: Collective Curriculum Development for the Lives & Literacies of Black Boys**

**Bianca Nightengale-Lee**

**Florida Atlantic University**

**Paul Massy**

**Florida Atlantic University**

**Brian Knowles**

**Palm Beach County School District**

**Abstract**

From the murders of Trayvon Martin in 2012, to Tamir Rice in 2014, to Philando Castile in 2017, to now George Floyd in 2020, the unrelenting assaults against Black men and boys serves as a haunting reminder of the imbalance of justice, equity, and humanization that continuously render Black male lives disposable in the U.S. Paradoxically, in education we could ask the same question about Black boys’ literate lives, as traditionalized school settings often serve as sites of oppression that judge their diverse literacies and cultural language practices against Eurocentric norms and White female expectations. While deficit theories associated with poor attitudes, violent behavior and classroom disengagement have been implicitly adopted to account for the literacy underachievement of Black boys, we argue curriculum which ignores the sociocultural and linguistic identities of Black boys are to blame for their disinvestment within the literacy process (Kirkland, 2008). In this work, we use this critique to call out the curricular barriers of the traditionalized literacy curriculum and share our collective journey to center Black boys at the core of the curriculum design process.

**Putting Black Boys’ Literacies First: Collective Curriculum Development for the Lives & Literacies of Black Boys**

From the murders of Trayvon Martin in 2012, to Tamir Rice in 2014, to Philando Castile in 2017, to now George Floyd in 2020, the unrelenting assaults against Black men and boys serves as a haunting reminder of the imbalance of justice, equity, and humanization that continuously render Black male lives disposable in the U.S. While arguments of a post-racial America are grounded by the induction of Barack Obama as the first Black president, Black men and boys continue to be stereotyped, criminalized, and incarcerated at rates that surpass any other demographic group. Acknowledging this truth forces us to question the value we place on Black male lives in our country (Johnson, Bryan & Boutte, 2018; Love, 2016; Lyiscott, 2017). Paradoxically, in education, we could ask the same question about Black boys’ literate lives, as traditionalized school settings often serve as sites of oppression that judge their diverse literacies and cultural language practices against Eurocentric literacy norms and White female expectations (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Swanson, Cunningham & Spencer, 2003). As Black Boys' literacy norms are often overlooked and undermined, their learning and engagement are subjugated to the periphery of the educational process. Implications of this subjugation can be linked to the literacy achievement of Black boys, which remains amongst the lowest in the nation across all demographic groups (NAEP, 2018). More specifically, in 2018, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that only 10% of eighth-grade Black boys scored proficient on their state-based standardized test in literacy.

While deficit theories associated with poor attitudes, violent behavior and classroom disengagement have been implicitly adopted to account for the literacy underachievement of Black boys, deficit ideologies such as these are dangerous because they place the onus of academic failure on Black boys rather than the power structures which maintain their marginalization. Dumas and Nelson refer to this mode of thought as a “crisis” in which,

Young men and boys become constructed as ‘problems’ in themselves-prevents us from seeing Black boys outside of public fears and anxieties about their future lives as adults and locates crises within Black male bodies rather than the political economy and racial order that heavily determine the living conditions and life chances of Black males from boyhood on (2016, p. 30).

Like Gloria Ladson Billings (2006), we denounce placing the disenfranchisement of Black boys’ achievement on them and instead exert our energies to interrogate the curricular and pedagogical structures that de-center Black male lives in literacy classrooms. Interrogating pedagogical outlooks and curricular approaches, rather than Black boys’ behaviors and attitudes, realistically situates the responsibility of literacy failure on schools, teachers, and districts as opposed to the Black boys they are intended to serve. Embedded in this critique, we argue the curriculum, which ignores the sociocultural and linguistic identities of Black boys, is a major factor in their disinvestment in the literacy process (Kirkland, 2008). Understanding the critical importance of literacy on the educational outcomes and life trajectories of Black boys, we write this work with feverish urgency to examine our collective efforts to engage Black boys in the literacy process and how our curricular outlooks and methods align with their needs (Kirkland, 2011, Muhammad, 2020).

Honest acknowledgment of the educational failure of Black boys’ exposes a detrimental divide between who they are as literate beings and the literacy methods and materials used to instruct them (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Duncan, 2002, Kirkland, 2011). Consequently, studies link the low literacy achievement of Black boys to a cultural, racial, and gender mismatch that fails to produce curriculum and learning experiences that reflect their unique social, cultural and linguistic competencies (Alim, 2007; Seltzer & de los Rios, 2018). Symptoms of this divide are emblematic of high dropout rates, frequent absenteeism and excessive school suspensions rates amongst Black boys in public schools (Coles & Powell, 2019; Swanson, Cunningham & Spencer, 2003; Tatum, 2006). For example, in 2018, the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights reported that African American males were suspended more than any other racial group, beginning in preschool. Alfred Tatum (2006) expounds on this phenomenon by stating,

African-American male students often exhibit various cultural-specific coping mechanisms- such behaviors as acting tough, failing to retreat from violence, avoiding self-disclosure and dissociating from school. These students are often subject to disproportionate and sometimes unfounded grade retentions and suspensions because teachers and administrators misinterpret these behaviors and find them offensive (2006, pg. 44).

While current models of literacy education continue to underserve Black boys, many educators remain tethered to pre-packaged curricular programs that promote one-size-fits-all approaches to teaching our most vulnerable student population. Researchers across the field of culturally relevant and anti-racist pedagogies call out the “curricular violence” associated with homogenized literacy methods, which fail to acknowledge students’ race, culture, ethnicity, gender and language as salient aspects of their identity (Baker-Bell, 2020; Herr & Anderson, 2003; Paris & Alim, 2014). Undergirded by the notion of curricular violence, we agree with literacy scholars, Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, & Taliferro Baszile (2017), that color-blind curricula exacerbate the proliferation of “symbolically violent” (Bourdieu, 2001; Coles, 2016; Coles & Powell, 2019) ELA classrooms, which ignore the sociocultural and linguistic competencies of Black students (Acosta, 2016; Baker-Bell, 2020; Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012). As power brokers, teachers make determinations about the legitimacy of different forms of literacy curriculum, validating some and denouncing others, which in turn send messages about what specific forms of reading, writing and speaking are most important and valued in the classroom. If Black boys are unable to see their form of literacy expression reflected in the curriculum, then symbolic violence may be enacted within the classroom. Thus, educators who are unwilling to interrogate their potential alignments to symbolically violent curriculum serve to perpetuate a curricular inequity that renders Black students, and in this case, Black boys’ literacies as flawed-prompting some to internalize attitudes of inferiority, which could result in lowered literacy engagement and academic performance (Camangian, 2011; Coles, 2016). To resist the reification of symbolically violent ELA classrooms, Kinloch, Burkhard, and Penn (2017) assert, “it is important for literacy practitioners and researchers to interrogate and teach against such beliefs in ways that build on the strength, brilliance, and power of Black lives” (p. 72).

While symbolic violence serves as a barrier between current public-school curricula and the literacy achievement of Black boys (Ball, 2009; Haddix & Rojas, 2011 Ladson-Billings, 1995; NAEP, 2018), finding effective methods to mitigate this barrier is the collective responsibility of multiple stakeholders beyond the scope of the classroom teacher. Akin to the Nigerian proverb “it takes a village to raise a child,” it literally takes a village of educational professionals, students, community members, and parents to collectively examine, strategize, and reconceptualize how we approach literacy instruction for Black boys. In this work, we stand as a village of educators committed to curriculum development for the lives and literacies of Black boys.

We lean into this perspective to first examine the curricular restrictions of the traditionalized literacy curriculum and then share our collective journey to center Black boys at the core of the curriculum design process. As a hip-hop based teacher educator, a music education Ph.D. student, and a district-level curriculum manager, we use this space to share our collective thought process, which captures the messy realities of abandoning the strictures of standardized curriculum and the various considerations at play when devising literacy curriculum that honors Black boys. In the sections that follow, we will provide the context for our curriculum development work, our conceptual understanding of curriculum development for Black boys, and key dialogic exchanges that helped us conceptualize the considerations noted above.

**Our Educational Contexts**

As educational professionals, we enter the curriculum conversation from different vantage points. I (Bianca) am a teacher educator, literacy specialist, and hip-hop researcher who focuses on critical pedagogy and humanizing curricular praxis, Paul is a second-year Ph.D. student whose scholarship focuses on Pan-Caribbean music education and culturally relevant pedagogy, and Brian is an African and African-American history expert, who serves as the manager of the African-American curriculum studies department for one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse school districts in the nation. Being that Paul and I work at the same institution, we would often engage in conversation around the challenges to overcome traditionalized educational practices. Many of our informal chats centered on curriculum creation that more authentically reflected the nuances and lived experiences of Black students. However, we weren’t able to really begin thinking through what a curriculum like this could look like until Brian presented us with the opportunity to partner with him at a local urban middle school. For years, Brian has partnered with this particular middle school to work with 7th & 8th grade young men of Color in their Leadership Academy course- which is an elective course that provides experiences for life, college, and career readiness. Brian’s aim for this school year was to collaborate with the teacher of record to deliver literacy-based experiences that engaged students in new and innovative ways. As a collective team, we worked diligently every week with the teacher of record, the Leadership Academy students as well as other key district personnel to develop what we call the Hip-Hop Learning Lab Curriculum (HHLLC).

**Conceptual Framework**

Though we each come from different disciplines, we understand literacy as a cultural process, mediated by lived experiences, cultural identities and linguistic practices. From this perspective, we view all literacy (language, text, words, visual expression) as an interactive exchange, contextualized through the reader's sociocultural lens. Acknowledging literacy from a sociocultural lens maintains that all reading and writing is mediated through social, cultural, political and socio-historic practices, an interpretation characterized by Gee (1996) called “new” literacies studies or socio-literacy studies. While we lean on the underpinnings of new literacy studies, this work aligns with African-American literacy studies, defined by Elaine Richardson (2003) as a rhetorical approach that acknowledges the socially, politically and historically situated complexities of Black language as a means of racial and cultural survival. As African-American literacies remain contested and challenged by dominant literacies, we view Black boy’s literacy practices as an instantiation of cultural survival to maintain their humanity amidst an oppressive and repressive educational system which forces them to “eradicate their mother tongue, mother culture, voice, identity and native knowledge” (Richardson, p. 32). Acknowledging this, we link how Black boys' literacies are used or unused in the curriculum to correlate to how they view themselves as valued in educational environments and what this value or devalue means for their sense of belonging (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015) within the literacy classroom. This outlook helped us narrow down the three basic elements that we felt were essential in the creation of the HHLLC. In preparation for the start of the school year, Brian, Paul and myself sat together to strategize the conceptual foundations upon which to build our curriculum. We agreed that each lesson would embed the following three components: a) student voice, b) hip hop-based education, c) critical literacy.

**Student Voice**

Knowing that Black boys' lived experiences and literacies are often subjugated to the back corners of the literacy classroom, we intentionally developed our curriculum in a co-constructed manner where we relied on students' voices to sculpt the curriculum. In this way, we deliberately sought feedback from our students to support their agency as learners and deepen their investment in the lessons we provided. Fostering agency to enact action, or what Freire refers to as praxis, is crucial in cultivating conscious individuals who own their power, potential and possibility (hooks, 1994). Though some refer to Freire’s approach as empowering education (Allen & Rossatto, 2009), he was deliberate in delineating the difference between agency and empowerment, through the emphasis of the inextricable teacher-student, student-teacher connection (Freire, 1970).

One of the ways we enacted Freire’s concept of agency or the teacher-student, student-teacher link was through a student survey which explicitly asked students questions about what kind of learning experiences they wanted to gain from the hip hop learning lab. The results of this survey were instrumental in helping us better understand the socio-emotional and socio-academic needs of our boys. We utilized survey results to tailor lessons that spoke to their current interests and realities. Though the survey only had six questions, it was an informative tool that not only gave us insight into the boy’s interests as students but also who they were as individuals. The six questions from the survey included:

1. What would you like to learn in the Hip Hop Learning Lab?

2. In general what makes school boring for you?

3. What is the best part of school for you?

4. What is the best part about the Hip Hop Learning Lab for you?

5. List the name of your favorite hip-hop song and rap artist.

6. List two things you worry about on a daily basis.

Upon analyzing the 25 surveys collected, we found five major themes from their survey responses. The following table represents the themes, which emerged, from the data, the corresponding survey question, and how we used each theme in the creation of the HHLLC.

**Table 1 Survey Themes & Curricular Development**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Survey Question | Student Response Theme | How Theme was used in Curriculum Development |
| 1 | How to create music | Lessons were intentionally created where we studied mentor texts (hip-hop texts) to analyze the arc and structure of hip-hop lyrics. Students then used the mentor texts to create their raps around critical topics. |
| 2 | Boring teachers | Instruction was delivered in an engaging format, where students were placed in a circle (cypher), which facilitated peer-to-peer communication. The teacher stood in the middle of the class to engage with each student through eye contact and proximity. Lessons were kept short and focused on explicit literacy skills. |
| 3 | Lunch, Gym, Courtyard | Since social interaction was of high interest to the boys, each lesson included small group discussion or project-based. Minimal behavioral direction was given, as we wanted the boys to engage with each other authentically and comfortably. |
| 4 | Creating Raps for Peers | After the boys completed their group raps, they spent time practicing how they would perform their raps in front of the class. Each performance was recorded and judged based on different criteria. After each group rap performance, students received peer feedback and teacher feedback. Groups were able to watch their performance again via a video recording to do their self-analysis. They discussed areas for growth and strengths of their rap and overall performance. |
| 6 | Being Poor, My Family | Understanding that money and family were significant concerns for the boys, each lesson either focused on financial literacy (entrepreneurship, generational wealth, welfare system) topic or a family-focused topic (brotherhood, community enrichment, taking care of momma). |

We found the most variation in question number 5, which asked the boys who their favorite hip-hop artist was. Their responses allowed us to understand what current hip-hop artists and topics were of interest to them. Understanding this, we paired old hip-hop artists with contemporary artists of interest to talk about various themes and critical issues pertinent to their lives and local communities.

**Hip Hop Focus**

Our decision to utilize Hip-Hop Based Education (HHBE) was constructed from an asset-based perspective. We wanted each literacy lesson to be of high interest for the boys while reflecting their cultural and linguistic identities. Far too often, students in urban contexts are conflicted as their cultural identities stand in direct opposition to White mainstream literacy expectations. Due to this, we ensured that each lesson in HHLLC was focused on one or more of the five (5) elements of hip-hop:

1. Emceeing

2. Djing,

3. Knowledge of self,

4. B-boying/b-girling,

5. Graffiti

Embedding HHBE as a literacy approach served as a useful form of culturally relevant pedagogy that placed students at the center of curriculum development (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Love, 2018). Leading scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings has shared her work around culturally relevant pedagogy (1995) to provide a foundation upon which to approach educational equity through curricular development grounded by Black students and urban communities' positionalities. Ladson-Billings asserts that culturally relevant pedagogy requires educators to combine academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness as an amalgam to promote academic and socio-emotional success for students of Color (1995). Looking at culturally relevant pedagogy from a research perspective, Flowers & Flowers (2008) contend, “researchers who support the notion of culturally relevant pedagogy assert that the linguistic differences, cultural heritage, and socioeconomic status are all positive factors that teachers should consider within their pedagogy” (p. 166). Considering this, the potential of HHBE rests within a shared understanding of vernacular and social practices which bridge literacy learning to the ways in which Black Boys exist and engage in the world (Beucher & Seglem, 2019; Freire, 1970; Emdin, 2010; Author A & Clayton-Taylor, 2020).

In the Hip-Hop Learning Lab, we used HHBE because it mirrored our Black male students' gendered, social, linguistic, and cultural mores. As opposed to the traditional or canonized forms of literature, we mechanized hip-hop as a physical and metaphorical text to promote a form of learning that mirrored the boys' lived experiences through song, art, video, dance, rap, and self-expression. Leaning on Luke’s conceptualization of multiliteracies pedagogies, we utilized hip-hop as “an agentive bridge between convention and innovation, between the canonical and the new, between reproduction and creativity” (Garcia et al., 2018, p. 75). For example, using both the elements of knowledge of self and emceeing, we analyzed the lyrics of “Alright”, written by Kendrick Lamar, along with his 2015 BET music awards performance, to interrogate police brutality. In conjunction with this written and visual text, we also dissected an infographic that shared facts about the association between Black boys and the school to prison pipeline. Within this lesson, we highlighted the likelihood of Black boys being acculturated into the criminal justice system based on current statistics. The boys used the discussion generated from this eye-opening lesson to create group raps about Black boys' disenfranchisement, which included topics focused on high suspension rates, racial stereotypes, and police brutality.

**Critical Literacy**

As our students lived within urbanized communities, they were subjected to the inequities associated with underserved environments. Considering this, we deemed it essential to embed elements of critical literacy into each lesson to push students to “confront the conditions of social and economic inequity in their daily lives” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 7). Fostering awareness of institutional power structures that contribute to societal oppression and structural racism is a foundational tenet of critical literacy as this form of pedagogical practice aims to “name, analyze, deconstruct, and act upon unequal conditions in urban schools and communities” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p.10). The revolutionary work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire stands as one of the most prolific contributions to critical literacy (Giroux, 2003; McLaren, 2000). Freire posits that when “an awareness of self and others through critical consciousness can be developed students can begin to reflect on themselves and the world in which they live to uncover hidden biases and imbalanced power structures” (1970, p. 94). Adopting a critical perspective to knowledge means that teaching and learning must be linked “to understand why things are the way they are, and how they got to be that way; to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar” (McLaren, 1986, p. 32). Therefore, our curriculum's primary aim sought to promote a critical view of literacy that pushed students to interrogate hip-hop as an aesthetic to uncover hidden forms of bias, discrimination, power, or inequity as it related to themselves and others in their community.

For example, based on survey data, we knew that family was an essential aspect of the boys’ lives, so we created a lesson which focused on the concept of brotherhood. In the brotherhood lesson, we analyzed the lyrics to “Middle Child” by J- Cole. In this text, J-Cole touches on a variety of issues felt by the Black community. However, in his critique of societal oppression, he also stresses the importance of being a brother to those younger than him. We used J-Cole’s words as a catalyst to discuss as a group why it was important to show brotherhood to people in our homes, community and classrooms. At the heart of this lesson, there was a large focus on self-love and community love and the significance of enacting both to protect the people and places we value.

**Key Reflections**

The dialogic exchange below represents our collective reflection to creating and teaching the Hip-Hop Learning Lab curriculum, as, at the time of this writing, we had just completed our experience with the boys. The specific structure of this work initialized with Bianca asking questions, capturing Paul and Brian's real-time comments in response to her questions. Within this conversation, we interrogate the curricular barriers of the traditionalized literacy curriculum and the advantages of devising a curriculum focused on HHBE. We want to make clear that the aim of this shared dialogue is not to put forth a perfect picture of collaboration, but to share our collective challenges as we wrestled with the detachment from standardized curricula, to reconceptualize praxis (Boutte, Johnson, Wynter-Yoyte & Uyoata, 2017) that platformed the lives and literacies of Black boys. The overarching considerations, which guided our dialogue, focus on:

1. Challenges to Authentic Curriculum Development

2. Advantages of using Hip-Hop Based Education,

3. Lessons Learned from the Hip-Hop Learning Lab.

**I. Challenges to Authentic Curriculum Development**

**Bianca: While we hold teachers responsible for perpetuating symbolic violence through their curriculum. We must also acknowledge the role of school districts in this scenario. What happens when school districts force teachers to become dependent on pre-packaged curricular programs?**

**Brian**: When teachers become too dependent on pre-packaged curricular programs, it limits cultural responsiveness, innovation in pedagogy and mastery of content. A significant component of developing lesson plans is understanding the learning preferences, culture, and students' perspectives. Prescribed lesson plans created by someone who does not have a relationship with a specific group of students cannot adequately address any of the components. It requires relationship building to develop instruction for individual students. This can contribute to student disengagement and poor academic performance.

**Paul**: Firstly, pre-packaged curricular programs become the norm. These documents guide the scope and sequence of the teachers' work and the students’ learning, and there is minimal room for the modification of the content. Secondly, most of the time, the curriculum is linked to the evaluative process. Therefore, teaching and learning become an exercise guided by the test, and students are not seen as the most important stakeholder. The opportunities for dialogue between the teacher and student aren’t valued and reduce over time. Thirdly, the pre-packaged curricular programs represent traditional instructional practices and content and do not consider the experiences of students of Color, especially Black boys. Therefore, they cannot fully connect with the text and context of the lesson itself.

**Bianca**: **What specific issues do you think prevent school districts/schools from engaging in an authentic curriculum that speaks to the lived experiences and literacies of Black children?**

**Brian**: Standardization and high stakes testing prevent school districts/schools from engaging in authentic curricular experiences that speak to the lived experiences and literacies of Black children. There are cultural biases in standardized tests that marginalize the history and cultural experiences of students of Color. The fact that school districts/schools measure their effectiveness on these assessments is indicative to the idea of teaching to the test. This forces teachers to provide instruction where the lived experiences of Black children are not at the core or omitted altogether.

**Paul**: To begin with, I think the experiences of Black students are not given the value it deserves, so placing Black lives at the core of the curriculum is most often seen by districts or schools as fringe practices or a type of elective that is optional to teach.

**Bianca:** **What would it take for schools to begin engaging in a curriculum that speaks to the lives and literacies of Black students, thereby putting them at the core of the curriculum rather than the periphery?**

**Brian:**Schools must espouse a culture where the needs of Black students are central. This includes their social-emotional and curricula needs. What is core in this environment is providing a curriculum where students can see themselves. This should not be relegated to elective courses, but it must be integrated into every subject area and discipline.

To mitigate the urgency around standardized testing, there must be an effort to create a curriculum aligned to the skills and standards associated with state/district assessments. This means teaching the skill sets required to be successful in these assessments while using instructional materials that are culturally relevant to Black students.

**Paul**: First, there must be the focus of quality professional training and development, focused on Afro-centric praxis, pedagogies, and outlooks and approaches that directly focus on Black student achievement. District-sponsored and supported culturally relevant P.D. that is systematic and ongoing throughout the year will support schools and teachers to understand practices that support the literacies of Black students.

**II. Advantages of using Hip-Hop Based Education**

**Bianca: For the Hip-Hop Learning Lab Curriculum, we centered hip-hop pedagogy as a multidimensional resource that more appropriately spoke to the lives and literacies of Black boys. What do you think this approach to literacy can afford other educators?**

**Paul**: HHBE platforms a curriculum that allows Black boys to experience literacy in multiple ways. Students get to critically observe, using audio or video, how the text has been performed in a multidimensional public space. Therefore, as we begin to engage boys through HHBE, the text is brought to life through the artist. The students can discuss the artist and his or her life experiences. They then connect to what the artist has written as text, which becomes an authentic experience. Furthermore, dialogue becomes richer as the discussion between teacher and students and student and student become natural to them in this environment and connections are made between HHBE and various literacy elements. Through using HHBE, students have a better understanding of how language operates to convey a message and how the context of hip-hop based songs connect to the expressive and communicative nature of literacy.

**Brian**: Since Hip hop culture is synonymous to that of the students, it enables them to engage in the literature reflective of their experiences. Teachers will discover that students already possess the skills that schools are trying to develop. As listeners of Hip Hop music, students can already analyze, decode, and perform other higher-order critical thinking skills. HHBE ensures students to identify they are not only learning at a higher-order level but have the capacity to perform at an optimal level and exceed expectations.

**Bianca:** **HHBE provides the educator and student with an indigenous resource. Students can bring their lived experiences to the classroom, and these experiences are given value. Why do you think this is important for Black students?**

**Paul:** HHBE provides Black students with the opportunity to bring their realities into the classroom. Traditional classrooms where a Eurocentric education is at the center do not accommodate Black students' realities, which serves as a demarcation between the world of the student and the learning process. These resources also promote a more dynamic pedagogy where teachers cannot hide behind the textbooks but create a more dynamic environment where interaction, meaningful dialogue, and relationship building transpire.

**Brian**: Providing the educator and student with indigenous resources not only bring their lived experiences to the classroom, but it validates their humanity and experiences. Traditional curriculums are Eurocentric and within this framework, the lives of non-whites are devalued. HHBE permits Black boys to see themselves in an academic environment, which creates a sense of belonging to a larger society. Their lives, experiences, and voices are now seen as valid when incorporated within the classroom/learning process*.*

**Bianca**:**HHBE provides the learner with a resource that is represented in different media iterations. Why is multimodal learning important for students today?**

**Paul:** HHBE education has currency. In today’s world, students are provided with media that allows them to acquire knowledge through all their senses. Therefore, HHBE embraces a world that students can identify with and uses media that are normative in their understanding. Our initial engagement with them is one of comfort and connects with their previous knowledge and experiences. I remembered in the Hip Hop Learning Lab, having students use their smartphones to record their rap sessions. They were also able to view the videos created to showcase the artistic performance of the text. They listened to beats found on YouTube and started the writing process. Interestingly, we also allowed them to observe the methodology used to compose the written material. The students became performers of their original work and learned audience etiquette. Therefore, all students' learning styles are engaged, and they are self-motivated, thus minimizing the need for punitive classroom management.

**Brian**: I remember in the Hip-Hop Learning Lab, the boys' smartphones become a tool for continuous learning and the sharing of the material. They can also find the relevant resources for the lesson using the different forms of media. Therefore, HHBE meets students where they are and engages their innate technological abilities. As such, the multimodality of using technology serves as a reference point of comfort and engagement that deepens their connection to literacy learning.

**III. Lessons Learned from the Hip-Hop Learning Lab**

**Bianca: Based on our journey in the Hip Hop Learning Lab, what did you learn from this experience?**

**Brian**: Elevating hip-hop as the primary text within the classroom allowed conversations to focus on a sort of culturally based ethnographic perspective that more accurately spoke to the realities of existing as Black male students. Though our curriculum was experimental, it reached beyond a simplistic understanding of popular rap songs (Asante, 2008; Hall, 2017). Moreover, the activities become transformative, and collectively teachers and students recommended positive ways to respond to these experiences. These experiences also built resilience, tenacity, and knowledge of self. Furthermore, students connected with artists and realized the role they are playing to ensure that they understand the real world and the part they must play to make it better. Through this journey, I discovered that this curriculum opened doors of dialogue and connection with students who in traditionalized settings were often disengaged from the learning process.

**Paul**: The Hip Hop Learning Lab became a place where both teachers and students were transformed due to the innovative instructional practices. Students became excited and readily participated in the dialogue critically. They listened and viewed the selected material and listened to the responses of their peers. They also responded to their peers' contributions and it became an enriching dialogic activity. Critical theorist Paulo Freire talks about contextualizing everything we read by analyzing the word and the world, which means that we cannot make meaning of the text without understanding the context upon which the word was created. Therefore, in the Hip Hop Learning Lab, the students connected to materials and experiences that were unfamiliar to them, and this time of engagement broadened their understanding of the word and the world.

**Implications**

As educators continue to cling to White mainstream notions of reading, writing and speaking, the dangers of symbolically violent classrooms proliferate to threaten the literacy achievement of Black male students. The nexus of this work predicates on introspective analysis to engage thoughtfully about the methods, orientations and materials we use to support Black boys’ literacy development. Considering that Black boys are among the **most** marginalized student population and yet represented the **least** within literacy curriculum, we believe village-based conversations which examine epistemological approaches, methods, and curriculum are needed frequently and across multiple stakeholders, at the classroom, district, and university levels if we are to begin to bind the divide between Black boys and the curriculum used to instruct them. As a collective, we reflect on the lessons learned from the HHLLC experience to share five approaches to support educational professionals as they orient themselves to curriculum development that prioritizes Black boys’ literacies first.

Placing Black Boys First Suggestions:

1. Unapologetically believe that Black Boys’ literate lives matter.

The belief that Black Boys’ literate lives matter translates to a deep appreciation and understanding of how Black boys language connects to their cultural, familial and social identities. The mattering of Black boys' literate lives requires a disposition which views the communicative forms they chose to express themselves as valid and worthy in a classroom setting. To be unapologetic about this belief means a de-centering of traditional literacy modes to encompass a broader perspective inclusive of anti-racist pedagogies.

2. Interrogate your belief systems to examine which forms of literacy are valued, privileged, and platformed most frequently in your classroom and why.

Again, working from your disposition, you need to question what is the dominant racial, cultural, and gendered epistemological base of your teaching, and the frequency upon which you include voices of Color, specifically Black male voices. This will require serious self-study and action-based classroom investigation to identify if **what** and **how** you teach resonates with the ways Black boys relate and engage in the world.

3. Cultivate a critical curriculum that integrates the socio-historical and sociopolitical contexts of Black boys and how they are viewed through a societal lens.

This curricular approach requires a critical critique of language itself, to interrogate the socio-historical underpinnings of dominant language ideologies and how these orientations intertwine with race, power, gender and privilege. Within this critique, you help Black boy’s question why certain language domains are more appreciated than others and the ways in which linguistic discrimination can play out in their everyday lives and communities. Problematize scenarios and situations where Black boys and other linguistic minorities are pressured to take off, let go, or code-switch away from their home language.

4. Have cultural and linguistic knowledge about Black boy literacies to realistically situate their ways of communication at the center of literacy lessons.

This requires an understanding of the rhetorical nature of Black language itself, and the syntactic and semantic structures akin to Black language users. These rhetorical modes should be seen as linguistic resources that are allowed in the classroom as Black boys respond and communicate their thoughts and ideas with peers and teachers.

5. Intentionally solicit the voices, opinions and outlooks of Black boys to ensure their perspectives and interests are reflected in the literacy classroom.

Co-construct lessons, projects, and activities with Black boys to ensure their voices and cultural perspectives are embedded into the pedagogical fabric of your classroom. This form of engagement elicits a greater sense of belonging for Black boys, a method of practice, often overlooked in traditionalized classroom settings.

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**Author Bios**

**Bianca Nightengale-Lee** currently serves as an Assistant Professor in the department of Curriculum Culture & Educational Inquiry at Florida Atlantic University. As a critically engaged community scholar, her work centers on academic, school, and community-based settings. Her research explores critical pedagogy as it relates to socially conscious, humanizing, and inclusive educational practice. Dr. Nightengale-Lee’s scholarship interrogates, resists, and re-frames traditionalized notions of curriculum development to produce equitable learning conditions for culturally and linguistically diverse students.  Through her teaching she iscommitted to preparing the next generation of educators to meet the demands of 21st century learning contexts, which reflect the racially, socially, and politically charged structures that shape education, and the practical pathways that lead to more humanizing modes of pedagogy.

**Paul Massy** is a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the department of Curriculum Culture and Educational Inquiry at Florida Atlantic University. He is also a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction program, where he continues to hone his skills in research interests that include culturally responsive pedagogy, arts education, critical pedagogy, and interdisciplinary studies.

**Brian Knowles**, M.Ed. has been an educator for over 13 years. He earned his B.A. degree in History from Florida Atlantic University and completed his graduate studies at the University of West Florida.

Brian currently serves as the Manager of the Office of African, African American, Latino, Holocaust, and Gender Studies within the School District of Palm Beach County, the tenth–largest public-school district in the United States. The Office of African, African American, Latino, Holocaust, and Gender Studies has been in existence for 26 years with a major focus on providing best teaching practices for students of color and the development of culturally responsive curriculum.

Brian and his team have been instrumental in supporting schools to create environments that are conducive to the academic success of all students. His work has served to eliminate systemic barriers and interrupt practices rooted in racism at many levels including the classroom, the School District, and the community. During his tenure, he is proud of several accomplishments including authoring the SDPBC Equity and Access Policy 1.041, which legally binds the District to address systemic deficiencies that create gaps in academic achievement. Brian has also designed a series of state-wide, secondary-level courses that highlight the historical contributions and experiences of African Diasporic people:

• Great Men and Women of Color Who Shaped World History

• Examining the African American Experience in the 20th Century through Music and

Visual Arts

• Exploring Hip Hop as Literature, and

• The History and Contribution of Haiti in a Global Context.