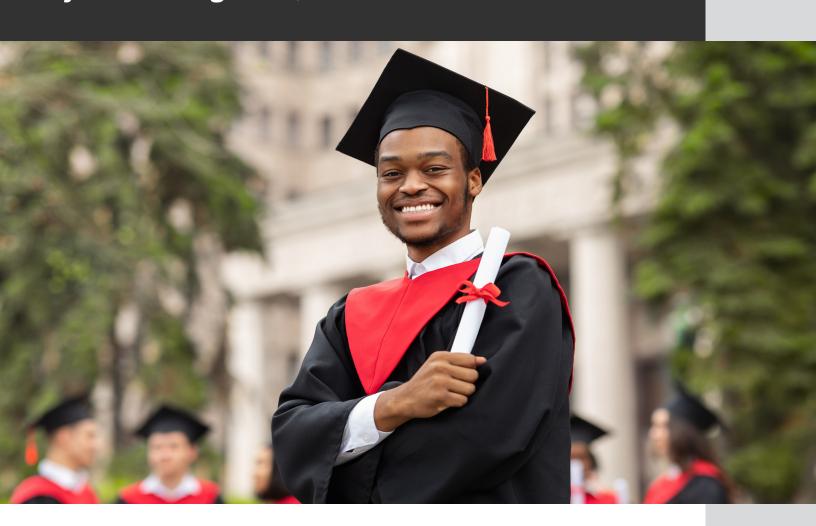USC Race and Equity Center

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' ENCOUNTERS WITH ANTI-BLACKNESS IN SCHOOLS

By James Bridgeforth, Ph.D.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James C. Bridgeforth is an educator, researcher, and policy advocate. He has extensive experience collaborating with practitioners and conducting equity-focused, policy-oriented educational research. Drawing on his professional experiences across K-12 and higher education contexts, his nationally recognized scholarship critically examines issues of racism, power, leadership, and learning in K-12 schools. James holds a PhD in Urban Education Policy (University of Southern California '23), an MEd in Educational Administration and Policy (University of Georgia '17), and a B.A. in Political Science and Sociology (Georgia College & State University '13).

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ABOUT THE SERIES

This practice brief is one of eight in a series of resources published by USC Race and Equity Center for every K-12 school and teacher education program across America. Guidance is offered to educators who are serious about achieving equitable learning conditions and outcomes for students, families, and teachers of color, despite increasing public scrutiny, executive gag orders, and legislative censorship. Each brief introduces research, practical examples, reflective questions, and useful strategies for educators advancing racial equity.

Understanding Students' Encounters with Anti-Blackness in Schools

How does a child learn after being handcuffed, or thrown around the room, by a person who is supposed to protect them, or racially insulted at their high school graduation for being Black? How does a Black child live, learn, and grow when her spirit is under attack at school, and her body is in danger outside the classroom? How does a parent grapple with this reality? How are a child's imagination and humanity stunted by the notion that they are never safe? Where does the Black soul go? (Love, 2016, p. 2)

As Sylvia Wynter (2006) explains, we live in a systemically antiblack world, where anti-blackness is steeped in the air we breathe, the water we drink, and in every institution with which we engage. Anti-Black racism, written into the fabric of this nation's founding documents, remains a sobering feature of society that negatively impacts the daily lives, outcomes, and experiences of Black people (Harris, 1993).

Black students' daily interactions in schools, both the meaningful and the mundane, are inextricably linked to the realities of anti-Blackness in society (Coles, 2020). Examples include racial disparities in discipline referrals, the overrepresentation of Black students in special education programs, and the myriad ways that Black children experience anti-Black violence in schools from their earliest encounters (Downer et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2010; Love, 2016).

After the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in Summer 2020 and the international rise of protests against racial injustice in our society, there was a glimmer of hope that there would be large-scale advances in the centuries-old struggle for Black liberation. For many, these protests awakened a sense of awareness of the ways that anti-Blackness influences Black people's lived experiences. Yet several years later, the racial reckoning that was promised to come in service of advancing equity and justice has instead revealed itself to be yet another manifestation of White backlash against racial progress (Anderson, 2016).

Given the enduring realities of anti-Blackness in society, it is critical that educators are adequately prepared to support Black children within their schools. Educators' beliefs, practices, and understandings of anti-Black racism directly impact the educational experiences and outcomes for Black students. Their role within the education system uniquely positions them as levers of change regarding pedagogical practices, community relationships, and the social-emotional wellbeing of Black children.

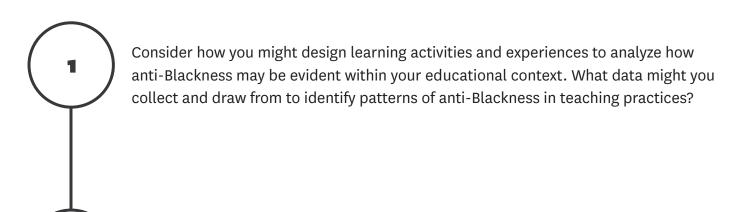# Counter Anti-Black Stereotypes and Affirm Black Children's Brilliance

Despite the ways that anti-Blackness manifests within our education system, it is important to unequivocally acknowledge the brilliance of Black children, despite how Black children are regularly targeted for perceived negative behaviors in schools as opposed to having their creativity affirmed in educational spaces (Berry, 2008; Kinloch et al., 2017; Miles & Roby, 2022; Mims et al., 2022). Miles and Roby (2022) provide several examples describing how even when Black children are identified for participation in gifted and talented programs, they are more likely to be described as not being a "good fit" for the program if they exhibit certain negative behaviors, whereas White students were seen as needing to be challenged more. This finding is aligned with additional research that explains how Black girls are regularly seen overly loud and expressive (Evans-Winters, 2005) and three times more likely than White girls to receive a disciplinary referral (Morris & Perry, 2017).

Collectively, this body of research calls for educators to explicitly work to counter the negative stereotypes and implicit biases that lead to these racialized disparities in Black children's learning experiences. Across all levels of educator preparation and service, there are various opportunities to disrupt these inequities. For example, educator preparation programs can provide targeted opportunities to have students unpack racialized biases through authentic learning activities that mirror the kinds of experiences that pre-service educators will eventually face within their classrooms.

A sample activity could be based on research that demonstrates the persistence of racial biases in teachers' grading when student work is perceived to be by a Black student (Malouff and Thorsteinsson, 2016; Quinn, 2020). Through guided reflection post-activity, teacher candidates could continue to explore how their biases influence grading practices and develop cognitive awareness of these biases to disrupt them in their eventual practice. Similarly, in-service educators can analyze their practice, particularly regarding behavior referrals within their classrooms or gifted and talented identification practices. Collecting and analyzing disaggregated data can allow teachers to recognize racialized patterns and work to develop new strategies that reduce racially biased exclusionary discipline practices.

Questions for Consideration

1 Consider how you might design learning activities and experiences to analyze how anti-Blackness may be evident within your educational context. What data might you collect and draw from to identify patterns of anti-Blackness in teaching practices?

2 Recognizing that anti-Blackness also lives in the policies that govern practice in our educational spaces, collectively explore how specific policies may perpetuate racialized inequities within your context.

Support the Development of Counterspaces for Black Students

Black students in K-12 schools consistently report experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and othering (Gregory et al., 2010; Sulé et al., 2018). These experiences are particularly salient in predominantly White educational spaces where Black students regularly seek same-race spaces of refuge to cope with the presence of anti-Blackness (Carter Andrews, 2010, 2012; Carter Andrews et al., 2019).

Counterspaces, defined by Solórzano et al. (2000) as "sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive climate can be established and maintained" (p. 70), can be critical to the success and wellbeing of Black students. These spaces offer protective environments where Black students can be relatively safe from daily microaggressions which can be responsible for negative social and academic racial climates, sowing seeds of self-doubt for students of color, and inhibiting the self-conceptualization process for those same students (Anderson & Cromwell, 1977; Solórzano et al., 2000). Warren and Coles (2020) extend on the power of counterspaces by offering a model for developing and supporting Black Education Spaces (BES) as a mechanism to counter anti-Blackness in K-12 schools. The concept of BES is grounded in a variety of both informal and formal Black affirming spaces (e.g., racial affinity groups within schools, barbershops, hair salons, etc.). Their model posits that these spaces can positively influence self-determination, self-actualization, and self-efficacy (Warren & Coles, 2020).

While there are certainly some limits on the ways that teachers can shift policies and practices within their schools and districts, one promising practice that could be replicated at the classroom level is the diffusion of counterspace pedagogy. Grace-Williams (2018) defines counterspace pedagogy as "decolonizing instructional strategies that are culturally responsive to the daily realities (e.g., racism and xenophobia) of Black students in urban spaces and beyond" (p. 18). Through centering the voices and experiences of Black children, engaging in personal, critical self-reflection to recognize and disrupt biases, and partnering with Black families to enhance student learning, counterspace pedagogy challenges teachers to redefine the ways that classrooms function, while also importantly recognizing the heterogeneity of Blackness. For even within the global nature of anti-Blackness, there are unique experiences within understandings of Blackness influenced by various social identities (i.e., ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation). Counterspace pedagogy acknowledges the dynamism of Blackness and offers Black students a positive opportunity to shape their learning experiences within the classroom setting.

Questions for Consideration

1 How might you facilitate the development and sustainability of counterspaces for Black students within your educational context?

2 Consider your role and positionality as you reflect on what opportunities lie within your zone of influence.
  a. For example, as a teacher educator, what opportunities exist for diffusing counterspace pedagogy into your own classroom settings?
  b. As an in-service or pre-service teacher, how might you work with Black students and families to develop racially and culturally affirming counterspaces or affinity groups within your school setting? What do you need in order to elevate student voice in designing such spaces?

Disrupt Anti-Black Narratives and Beliefs in Classroom Curricula

Classroom curricular materials are a consistent site of anti-Black racial violence in schools. Countless media reports dictate the continued presence of anti-Black pedagogical racism through Underground Railroad simulations, mock slave auctions, and other reprehensible actions (Bridgeforth, 2021). Coles (2021) explains that anti-Blackness in traditional school curricula is to be expected given the foundations of anti-Black settler colonialism in the United States. The Eurocentric narratives and histories that are infused throughout our curricula and standards both decenter positive depictions of Blackness in ways that maintain the legacy of Black dehumanization in society (Coles, 2021; Love, 2019).

This reality offers educators an opportunity to challenge these curricular norms through supporting Black youth in continuing to develop their critical consciousness and disrupt the norms of anti-Blackness embedded in traditional classrooms. Coles (2020) presents one model of what this opportunity might look like in practice through the collection and development of critical literacy artifacts (e.g., memories, histories, experiences, and dreams of students' conceptualizations of living while Black). This process of disruption is not simply a means to dismantle oppressive norms, but instead recognizes the inherent power of Black youth to build and co-create their own realities while encouraging them to develop new curricular norms grounded in their own understandings of Blackness.

Questions for Consideration

1 There is a rich history of using critical writing exercises in classrooms to document counternarratives and dream of a more equitable and racially just society. Based on your educational position, how might you facilitate these kinds of opportunities within your context?

The strategies and recommendations embedded in this brief are offered in the spirit of kihana miraya ross' (2021) conceptualization of the "meantime in between time", where we who care about the hopes, lives, and dreams of Black children work to mitigate the everyday harms of an anti-Black world. It is my hope that this work is a catalyst for change as the nation continues to reckon with its structurally anti-Black past and present in order to move toward an equitable and just future for Black children.

This work involves honoring and affirming the past, present, and future gifts of Black people, while ensuring that Black death and despair are not the only lenses through which Blackness is portrayed. While we recognize that anti-blackness is enmeshed in the fabric of our society, so too is the hope, joy, and brilliance that is also endemic to Blackness. Black futures in education are rooted in the right to affirming, loving, and liberatory educational experiences. And difficult as it may be, it is the responsibility of educators to ensure that their practices in schools make these futures a reality.

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ABOUT THE USC RACE AND EQUITY CENTER

The University of Southern California is home to a dynamic research and organizational improvement center that helps professionals in educational institutions, corporations, and other contexts strategically develop and achieve equity goals, better understand and correct climate problems, avoid and recover from racial crises, and engineer sustainable cultures of inclusion and respect. Evidence, as well as scalable and adaptable models of success, inform our rigorous approach. Grants from the Ford, Lumina, Bill and Melinda Gates, W.K. Kellogg, Kresge, and Open Society Foundations have funded the Center's research and partnerships.

The Center is home to the USC Equity Leadership Academies (a professional learning and organizational change series for K-12 schools and districts), USC Equity Institutes (a professional learning and organizational change series for higher education institutions), the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (a quantitative survey), PRISM (a racial equity employee recruitment tech tool for higher education), and the Alliance for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Business.

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