Making Black Lives Matter at School

In a country that has always defined norms and rules through a White, cis-hetero, Judeo-Christian, ableist lens, we have no option but to imagine and then build a radically different world in which Black lives matter. As educators, much of what is involved in how we create and design learning environments for our students must be situated in understanding the experiences of Black children, Black families, and Black communities. By creating more humanizing learning environments – by leveling up our expectations for how we treat Black students in school – we inevitably and consequently create a foundation for the treatment and support for all students.

We could not possibly set out an easy list of edicts that determine an isolated safe-zone for Black students within what we know to be a world still deeply invested in furthering Black suffering. Instead, we ask that educators meditate and reflect on some critical questions about how to make Black lives matter in the classroom, at school, and in the community. We also offer some fundamental guiding principles that drive any effort to center the mattering of Black lives.

Please use these questions as a starting point for conversations with your colleagues about how to transform pedagogy, practice, and organizing (within and outside the school environment). Like all transformative inquiry, this incomplete set of questions should lead to further questions and inquiry.
1. How are the voices, accomplishments, and successes of Black folx uplifted in my lessons, units, and curriculum? Rather than focus on singular events or individuals, does my approach highlight the everyday actions and community organizing that will lead to change?

2. Do my Black students feel that they can be their full, whole selves without fear of punishment? Does my classroom celebrate Black forms of creative expression in language, style, imagery, fashion, etc.?

3. How might my classroom practices, philosophies, and principles, and the design of my learning environment overall be limiting to Black students? What practices do I engage in that fail to affirm the humanity of Black people?

4. Am I listening to my Black students when they communicate through their words, work, actions, and behaviors? Or am I silencing these expressions?
1. How are schoolwide policies and practices – especially disciplinary practices – applied across categories of race? Do problematic patterns emerge when we look at how policies are applied to Black students and when we also consider the intersections of gender, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability with Blackness?

2. How do we communicate the promise of education to our Black students? Do we reproduce the “myth of meritocracy” and individualism, or do we value collective uplift for Black families and communities? How do we disrupt notions of individual exceptionalism that further notions of disposability for the overwhelming majority of Black students?

3. What opportunities are being created for educators to engage in dialogue and unlearn biases and deficit ideologies about Black students, Black parents, and Black communities?

4. What are some of our school practices and policies that shrink the humanity of or dehumanize Black students? How can we counter those policies and practices?

5. How can we build restorative and transformative principles and practices at every level of daily operations in the school day and beyond?
1. What is our school’s relationship to Black community organizing? Do we have relationships with local movement organizers? Do they see our school as a place that believes in their mission? Do they see our school as a place to connect with local families?

2. How do we see our mission of providing a quality education in connection with movements for accessible healthcare? Housing rights? Fair wages? The environment? The “criminal punishment system” (Kaba, 2017)?

3. What is my role in understanding the impact of gentrification on the lives of Black students and their community?

4. How do we uplift the everyday Black folx in our community and include them in co-creating the learning environments for students, parents, and community members?

5. How do I understand the role that local/state laws and policies have on the educational experiences of my students? What is my role in working to change policies, regulations, and practices that target and harm Black students and families?
Self-Determination

Our learning environment and pedagogical practices should uphold and support the belief that Black folx and other oppressed groups have the right to determine what is best for their own individual and collective well-being.

A pedagogy of love

Writer and scholar bell hooks defines love as the act of being committed to one’s own, and one another’s, spiritual growth and development. The learning environments for Black students, and the adults that facilitate these spaces, must embrace and engage in practices that demonstrate a clear and consistent commitment to their own spiritual growth and development, as well as the spiritual growth and development of Black students, families, and communities.

Healing-Centered Organizing

Healing-Centered Organizing embraces a framework that helps develop leadership within students and includes the following: (a) healing and transformation from social and personal trauma; (b) political engagement, advocacy, and organizing; and (c) building alternative economic models (Urban Peace Movement, 2014).
Ubuntuism

This traditional African/Pan-African cultural principle of the interconnectedness, “oneness,” and “togetherness” of all living beings is foundational to how we understand the world, our experiences as beings in mutual relationship with all living beings, as well as how we structure our communities, and collective and individual experiences, learning, development, organizing, and healing.

Creativity and Imagination

Integral to organizing, our collective and individual ability to imagine a new world, a new way of being, learning, and designing learning environments is imperative to transforming our world. Multiple modes of creativity and imagination will need to be embraced, particularly those we have most marginalized, devalued, and delegitimized, in order to solve the most pressing and complex problems and conflicts of our time. This will require us to tear down artificial borders, biases, and inhibitions that police the imaginations and modes of creativities of those most marginalized or that limit our own imagination and creativity.

A SMALL SELECTION OF SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR GETTING STARTED

Books

All About Love, by bell hooks

Hope and Healing in Urban Education: How Urban Activists and Teachers Are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart, by Shawn Ginwright

Teaching for Black Lives, edited by Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, and Wayne Au, for Rethinking Schools

We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom, by Bettina Love

Websites, articles, and other resources


National Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action Website: https://blacklivesmatteratschool.com

Black Organizing Project’s Black Sanctuary Pledge: bit.ly/2H7brlc

Transform Harm: https://transformharm.org/restorative-justice


Police-Free Schools: We Came to Learn Toolkit, from The Advancement Project and the Alliance for Education Justice: bit.ly/2ry8mDI

Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute, by adrienne maree brown: bit.ly/2VbHzZV

Tell us a bit about yourself.

I started as a teaching artist working in schools where I felt there was a lack of a culturally responsive curriculum, little attention to social-emotional and creative learning, and few opportunities for student self-discovery. I got to work with children in after-school programs, and, realizing the positive impact this created, I believed the value of these alternative spaces needed to be integrated into the traditional school day. The practice of hiring external programs instead of improving school environments to meet all of the students’ needs had to stop, in my opinion. In pursuit of that mission, I went to school to get my master’s degree in teaching.

Now, in the classroom, I use my background in art education to teach young people to use their voices as change agents in their communities, to freely speak their minds, and to challenge the status quo. I teach students to use writing and critical thinking to promote their self-identity, self-esteem, community unification, and self-empowerment. I believe in facilitating opportunities for students to work together to make the classroom a safe, supportive place to express themselves and to hear the expressions of others.

How do you make Black lives matter in your classroom every day?

I allow my students to be seen, beyond the traditional demands of the classroom. I know the so-called culture of “achievement”: teaching to the test, the lack of diversity in the content that gets taught, the disappearance of history, science, and extracurriculars to overwhelm students with extended time for ELA and math, and discipline systems deeply rooted in anti-Blackness to supposedly keep students on this track of “achievement.”

But there are some key things I focus on that I wish all educators would center when working with Black students and families:

1. My students matter, and I make sure my classroom communicates that. We get lots of messaging from visuals, and a lot can be said without saying anything. Our classrooms should reflect the level of excellence we want our children to embody. How can you expect your students to strive for success, but not see themselves reflected in the room where you spend your time together? They need to see themselves on the walls. Students also get strong messaging when the curriculum doesn’t feature
Making Black Lives Matter at School

much about the history of Black people, when it fails to include literature that centers Black narratives and characters, when we don’t talk about the positive elements of Blackness beyond experiences of oppression. Where is Black joy reflected in our rooms and our curriculum? How is Black leadership posted on our walls? How are we messaging to students that Blackness and greatness are synonymous?

2. I don’t shame students into abandoning their own ways of being.

In some schools, the use of words like “scholar” or “excellence” are actually used to shame students away from behaviors that are cultural to them: the music they listen to, the topics they find interesting, the way they dress, their natural demeanor, and the way they speak are policed until students assimilate. Teachers should honor that the culture Black students bring into the classroom has value. How connected could you be to a place that tells you everything that you should be is nothing that you are? As educators we can’t erase student identities, which are still fragile and growing, by completely shutting down who they are. We need to offer multiple ways of being while also honoring and maintaining who they already are.

3. I get connected to the community in which my school is rooted.

Many times, as educators, we look at the communities our Black students come from through a lens of deficit. We see the impacts of poverty and marginalization on the neighborhoods in which our students live. Although many of our Black students face challenges, there is also gold to be found. During my student teaching, my advisor made me go on a neighborhood scavenger hunt. I visited the gems of the city as well as the places my students felt were important in their world. I saw the beauty of the city and supported students in also seeing the beauty of the place they call home. This created a sense of togetherness and respect that strengthened our bond.

4. We need to create communities of sharing.

Teachers should come out of their silos and create a community of sharing best practices. What lesson plans worked and created engagement? What practices make our Black students feel most seen? How can we create a culture of support and utilize our classroom as a safe space for our Black students? There should not be a culture of keeping your door closed, but instead, a community of educators utilizing each other as resources to make the school successful at supporting its Black students.

5. We need to challenge anti-Black practices in our schools.

Certain procedures in schools are rooted in anti-Blackness and allow Black students to be viewed as criminals. Black students experience harsh discipline, high suspension rates, and negative stigma because teachers misunderstand their Blackness. It may seem impossible to disrupt whole systems enforced by the administration that rules your school, but teachers have control of their classrooms. Teachers should ask themselves if their own toxic ideas about Blackness may explain how they interpret the behaviors of their students. Educators should implement alternative methods for handling conflict within their classrooms, be sensitive to how Black students experience school, and create a space of protecting students if a school operates in a way that creates harm to Black students.

Finally, what do you envision for the future of teaching Black students?

I envision a place where we don’t think teaching “college readiness” starting in kindergarten is the end to all our problems. I imagine a place where schools aren’t chasing the next quick fixes that are inconsistent and not well-researched and that ultimately fail our students. I envision schools that refuse to value only those students who can turn out the test scores they need. I want a school system that allows Black students to show up as their full selves.