

# What I Know About Teaching, I Learned From My Father: A Critical Race Autoethnographic/Counternarrative Exploration of Multi-generational Transformative Teaching

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*In this paper, using autoethnographic/critical race counternarratives, I draw on the personal and professional experiences of my father to provide a historical and contemporary analysis of how his experiences and pedagogical practices informed mine. The question that drives this research is, "How can we use the teaching success of two generations of Black educators in a way that will contribute to the academic success of African American students?" By examining the transformative pedagogy of my father, I juxtapose his story with mine to celebrate our education successes with students, especially those who have been labeled "hard to teach." The intention of this research, via my personal narrative, is to provide insights into how to more effectively prepare teachers to draw on the cultural and historical knowledge of their students.*

*Keywords:* counternarrative, multi-generational, transformative teaching

Occasionally, my answer to the question, "How long have you been teaching?" My response to this question is taken with amazement by those who expected me to have been in the classroom for a longer period of time given my wealth of knowledge. For me, however, this is not a surprise. After all, I am a third-generation teacher. With such a legacy, I was destined to become a teacher. Teaching is in my blood. I have been around education and educators all of my life.

I have also been around storytellers all my life, so it came as no surprise that storytelling became my central research method. After all, while sitting around the dinner table, I would listen to my parents and grandmothers tell stories about their experiences and the history of Black education in the segregated South, a world created by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision. As they told stories about teaching in segregated schools, common

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themes would emerge. Even though the physical conditions were substandard, the quality of education received by Black students was second to none. The message I received listening to my parents and family members was that education is very important to my family and African American culture. In fact, for years, Black grandmothers and families like mine advised, “Get an education, boy, ‘cause that’s one thing they [White society] can’t take away” (Newby & Tyack, 1971, p. 201). Inevitably, I was inspired by the emphasis and importance my parents placed on education. They motivated me and provided me with a definite interest in “storying”) their lives as educators (Hayes, 2006; Hayes, Juarez, & Cross, 2012).

Taking a multi-generational view, this study draws on oral life histories and a qualitative, critical race analysis to explore thematic patterns over time and across the educational ideals and pedagogical practices of two African American educators from different generations of the same family: Cleveland Hayes, Sr., my father; and me, Cleveland Hayes, II. I examine how our personal and professional experiences have influenced our respective understandings of our work and provided the basis of successful teaching for African American learners. By examining the lessons I learned from my father and, subsequently, brought into the classroom, it becomes possible to better understand how to more effectively prepare future teachers to draw on cultural and historical knowledge and, thus, successfully teach all students. After all, as Maya Angelou (1993) states, “When I am speaking of the Black experience, I am speaking to the human condition” (track 1).

### **We Teach Too: Black Male Teachers**

As Lynn (2006b) has observed, “The voices of Black men have been marginalized within the discourse on teachers and teaching” (p. 2497). In education and elsewhere in society, moreover, there have always been Black men—Malcolm X, Carter G. Woodson, George Washington Carver, W. E. B. DuBois, to name just a few—who have historically taken up the role of educator. These men refused to be defined and contained within an imperialist White supremacist system of race-based domination. In addition, they made use of every tool and means at their disposal to challenge and change dominating structures and to empower themselves and others targeted by racial domination (hooks, 2003). The philosophies of Black male teachers on successful teaching for Black children may, therefore, provide a valuable source of knowledge on the effective schooling of Black students and other students of color.

Like their female counterparts, Black male teachers have also made significant contributions to successful teaching of Black youth and other children of color. As Lynn (2006b) notes:

[T]he scholarship on Black teachers has expanded notions about what constitutes a sound healthy pedagogical practice. Moreover, these studies remind us that one’s ethnic and racial identity can be a driving force for developing the commitment to improve the lives of African American youth in urban schools. (p. 2499)

Focusing primarily on Black women teachers, the existing research on exemplary Black educators has just begun to establish the ways race and racism influence Black male teachers’ work and the ways they view their role in the classroom (Lynn, 2002, 2006a, 2006b). With Lynn (2006b), therefore, we too must ask, “To what extent do Black male teachers, who express a

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commitment to serving African American youth, embody the characteristics of culturally relevant teachers?” (p. 2499).

Of the studies that have considered Black men teachers specifically, the focus has often been on the historical forces of context, including low wages and salary inequities, that have helped to keep them out of the teaching profession (Fultz, 1995a, 1995b; Smith, 1986). Other studies on teachers and teachers’ lives have considered ways the gendered division of labor in the United States serves to constrain men of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, especially Black men, from entering the teaching profession (Lynn, 2002, 2006a, 2006b). For Black men, images of Black males as dangerous and criminal have historically constrained the impetus for them to become teachers (Howard, 2001, 2003).

Exploring reasons why Black male teachers enter the teaching profession despite the many social and economic barriers, recent studies suggest that African American men, like African American women, tend to recognize and want to change inequities around them and enter teaching to apply education toward that democratically transformative end (Brown, 2009; Lynn, 2002, 2006a, 2006b; Lynn, Johnson, & Hassan, 1999). These studies also show that Black male teachers, like their female counterparts, often bring a strong commitment to the Black community in their understandings of teaching for social change. Pointedly, the views of Black men on teaching as social change and commitment to the Black community are indicative of public discussion re-emerging within African American political discourse on “the role African American men would play in altering the educational and social conditions of African American male youth” (Brown, 2009, p. 417).

With regard to how we view our work and roles as Black male educators, what is it, then, about my father and me that we know how to foster successful learning for Black students? Calls for Black male educators (and Black women as well) endure. If there is no causal relationship between the number of Black male teachers and the academic success of Black students, and we posit there is not, then what is it that teachers who are Black and male bring to the education of Black children? Following Brown (2009), this study builds on existing studies of Black male educators (Lynn, 2000, 2006a, 2006b; Lynn et al., 1999) to broaden research about African American male teachers and draw on their narratives to examine their views on teaching, their students, and the influence of race and racism in structuring their work in the classroom. After all, from the perspective of Black male teachers, “We were there too.”

### **How to Read this Essay: Purpose of Inquiry**

Through stories of their professional experiences, Cleveland, Sr. and Cleveland, II describe how we constructed pedagogy to address the unspoken privileges of Whiteness that both directly and indirectly affected our teaching and the lived experiences and learning of our students. Significantly, one need not be African American to learn how to construct a teaching pedagogy that addresses the unspoken privileges of Whiteness. What is needed, as is illustrated in the paragraphs below, is an understanding of how Whiteness functions to privilege its own interests and how individuals and groups help perpetuate the system of Whiteness.

Cleveland Hayes, Sr. is from Mount Olive, Mississippi. His mother was also a public school teacher. After graduating from high school, he attended Rust College, where he majored in social studies, later becoming a social studies teacher. My father commenced his first teaching job in Kemper County, Mississippi, at Washington High School, an all-Black public

high school. When the Kemper County public schools desegregated, he went to teach at West Kemper High School. He retired from teaching in 2004.

My narrative is 43 years in the making. The lessons I learned from my father started early on as I grew up in a family of teachers. I am a third-generation educator. I started teaching in 1992 in the junior high school I attended as a student. I had a brief stint in the U.S. Air Force before returning to teaching in 1996. I taught in K–12 schools for 12 years before moving to higher education in 2001. It was while I was a student at Mississippi State that I became friends with the students my father had taught. I heard from them the impact he had on their lives. In that moment, listening to his former students talk about the influence he had on their lives, my father’s story began to influence mine.

What the reader will see as a theme in our stories is our struggle with trying to combat the historically embedded notion of *Black inferiority* (O’Connor, 2006)—a set of beliefs, widely held among Whites, suggesting that, for example, African Americans tend to be unmotivated, less intelligent, and more aggressive and violent than Whites (Feagin, Vera, & Batur, 2001; Pica & Feagin, 2007).

We hope readers will see how we took it as a moral obligation to use our personal experiences as a way to help our students eliminate social inequalities and institutional oppression in their pursuit for a more robust democracy. With many pressing issues in education, we likewise hope that readers learn from our experiences and see our lessons as a call to action, thereby becoming agents of change and school culture shifters (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Freire, 1973; Lynn, 2006a; Quijada Cercer, Gutierrez Alvarez, & Rios, 2010; Yosso, 2005). My hope in presenting the narratives in this article is to use our experiences and wisdoms as a starting point for school change endeavors aimed at realizing the promise of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case—that Black children will finally get the better and equal education that is rightfully theirs (O’Connor, 2006).

Yet—and this is very important—, I must caution against reading our narratives as a recipe, how-to-guide, or other source of magic bullet-type formulas on how to successfully teach Black and other racial minority students and, thus, “fix” our schools. There will be no recipes provided herein. As my father and I define it, teaching and learning is cultural work and a way of thinking and approaching life and its many domains, not a technocratic, rational, objective, and mechanistic process or procedure. U.S. education already has a plethora of narrow curricula, scripted pedagogies, and standardized assessments that are proven failures despite the good intentions that may have produced them (Hayes, Juarez, & Cross, 2011; Quijada Cercer et al., 2010).

### **Methodological Perspective**

Studying the work of African American teachers has been a continual challenge in educational research. This challenge is largely due to the institutionalized silencing and sterilization of the Black experience in the United States. Following Lynn and Jennings (2009) and Ware (2006), this study asks, “What is unique about the pedagogy of African American teachers, especially as related to African American students?”

This paper employs a critical race theory (CRT) lens as a way to present the relevant narratives of my father and me. In particular, I use this theory to recognize the “experiential knowledge of people of color” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005), in this case Cleveland Hayes, Sr. and Cleveland Hayes, II. This lens also provides the researcher or activist with a tool to assist in the

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work toward “eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression” (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005, p. 10). According to Tate (1997), CRT crosses epistemological boundaries in that it borrows from several traditions, including liberalism, feminism, and Marxism, to include a more complete analysis of “raced” people. Crossing epistemological boundaries for the research allows for a more all-encompassing portrayal of our lives. As explained by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998), CRT has a place within education in that it names one’s own reality as a way to link form and substance in scholarship. CRT in education allows for the use of parables, chronicles, stories, and counterstories to illustrate the false necessity and irony of much of current civil rights doctrine. Indeed, we have not gone as far as we think we have. Adopting CRT as a framework for educational equity means we will have to expose racism in education and propose radical solutions to address it (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

This study is of a qualitative design. I use critical race counternarratives and autoethnography focused on our particular lived and work experiences as a method to recount the experiences and perspectives of racially and socially marginalized people. Counternarratives reflect the lived experiences of people of color to raise critical consciousness about social and racial injustice. Particularly, they illustrate how poor and working-class Blacks fight the interlocking forces of race, class, and gender domination (Knight, Norton, Bentley, & Dixon 2004; Yosso, 2005). Counternarratives, according to Delgado (1989), can be loosely described as the narratives or testimonies from marginalized groups whose secondary status in society defines the boundaries of the mainstream and whose voices and perspectives have been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized.

This study also employs what Reed-Danahay (1997) describes as an autoethnography. She argues that an autoethnography enlists a rewriting of the social self. Quicke (2010) argues that autoethnographic work often involves, as is the case in this project, reflection and analysis of personal memoirs and is often focused on the self as a participant in the social process. Autoethnographic accounts of experiences, by virtue of being self-reflective, are deeply personal, and researchers using this method must produce a highly personalized, revealing text in which an author tells stories about his or her own lived experiences.

Autoethnography is also connected to critical race counterstories. Briefly, critical race counterstories and autoethnographic work are connected in the following ways. First, they both teach us about self. Second, they teach us to write as a cathartic endeavor. Third, they provide the scholar enough oxygen to live and breathe self-critical attitudes and self-disclosure in teaching and learning (Hughes, 2008).

In order to capture my father’s story, I conducted three formal, semi-structured interviews followed up with extensive and ongoing, informal conversations and communication via e-mail, telephone, and in person. My intent in collecting and analyzing this study’s data was to facilitate a discussion and understanding of one Black educator’s views on teaching. During the interview process, because I knew many of these stories already, I encouraged my father to tell his story fully as I continually reminded myself of my place as his son (Lynn & Jennings, 2009).

In contrast, my story, within a CRT framework, is reflective. In my autoethnography, I reflect on the past, how I internalized the notion of having to be better than the best, and how that notion manifested in my teaching. My story is an illustration of the racism that is an ordinary part of America. I share what I learned from my father as a way to critique a system that encourages the practices of liberalism, which continues to marginalize students hidden behind the notion that we are all equal and racism as we knew it in the 1960s is over.

### **What Daddy Taught Me: Cleveland Hayes Senior's Critical Race Counterstory**

In this section, I present excerpted narratives of my father, where he articulates his perspectives on successful teaching for Black students and what he taught me. Importantly, my father explains how he understood the role and significance of education in his students' lives and then, second, how he went about implementing his teaching practices, his views on education, and the task of teaching Black children. Before presenting his narrative however, I want to alert readers to a brief cautionary note—as I present the narrated perspectives of Cleveland Sr. and Cleveland, II, I ask that those reading the two narratives take each viewpoint as being that of the particular individual articulating it and not in any way representative of the narratives of all Black educators past and present or anytime. My father states,

Success is an attitude—let that attitude remain by itself or you can build on it by doing something about it and what you want to do. You can have an attitude and you've just got an attitude. Well, now what happens if I take my attitude and I live and I expand? Success is determined one attitude at a time. Now, do you want to be successful? Yes. That's an attitude.

Now, if I want to be successful, what do I add to it? What do I add to it to become successful? Everybody's got an attitude, whether good or bad. Well, now, if I am going to be successful, I have to add certain things to this.

You can have an attitude and be narrow minded, the most narrow-minded person, but what happens when you take that and you expand? Expand, expand, expand, expand, do you see you've got to expand? You've got to do it. One attitude at a time. I ask my students, "What do you want to know? What's on your mind?" They say, "I want to be a welder." I ask, "What would it take to be a welder? What do you need to deal with?" They say, "Uh, go to school." I say, "What's the problem?" Everybody can't be Kobe Bryant. Everybody can't be Hank Aaron. Somebody's gotta iron your clothes; somebody's got to sew your clothes; somebody's got to wake you up; somebody's got to mop the floor at the hospital.

You know, success is not determined always by the bank account. Success is self-peace. That's what I think, it's about attitude. Often times, I have to go into the classroom and do damage control. We have these White female teachers who are afraid of the Brothers<sup>1</sup> and they look for an excuse to kick these Brothers out of class. Now, don't get me wrong, these Brothers are hard. A lot of them are coming from Detroit and Chicago to live with their grandparents.

I had this one guy who had come down from Detroit and he was hard and angry. He was in this teacher's room and the two of them had gotten into it over something. This guy was not even my student; I happened to be in the hallway when she kicked him out of class.

Now, if he got sent to the office, he was going to be suspended and kicked out of school, which would have only made him that much angrier. You know, it is that self-fulfilling prophecy. It was expected for this young brother to get kicked out of school.

So, I grabbed him and said, "Let's go for a walk and grab a Coke Cola and talk." This gave him a chance to cool down and hopefully resolve the situation. I had to give this young brother—I felt it was my obligation to give this young brother some

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guidance on how to deal with his anger with years and years of being what he considered disrespected at school.

Yes, teaching students history is important, but something that I learned from the teachers that I had and that teaching is mentorship. Mentoring involves taking students where they are and moving them to the next level. I think many teachers today have lost sight of that. They are too worried about test scores and don't worry enough about the souls of kids. (C. Hayes, personal communication, May 2005)

For my father, education has a purpose, which is to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to realize their full potential and life dreams. He views education as a tool for empowering students. My father's views his work as a teacher as a way to help students build on what they bring to the classroom, moving them to the next level—*expand, expand, expand*, as he put it.

I learned from my father to value what students bring to the classroom in terms of their cultural backgrounds and experiences. The teaching philosophy of *expand, expand, expand* presumes that what students begin with is of positive value and has worth in the classroom. Accordingly, Daddy likewise does not draw on assumptions of Black cultural or moral inferiority in his teaching. He instead accepts where students are when they enter his classroom, even if it is with the narrowest of attitudes, and he helps them build from that point toward their goals.

I learned from my father that, as an educator, I have to know my students well, as he did, to help them to expand toward the fulfillment of their dreams and goals. As Daddy notes in his narrative, he talked to students and asked them about their dreams. He used his teaching as a way to help students take the appropriate steps between articulating a life dream and making it a reality. Accordingly, positive relationships between Daddy and his students were a priority. Without a positive relationship with his students, there was little likelihood that they would share their life goals and dreams with him as their teacher.

Daddy's care for students also emerges in his emphasis on doing what he refers to as *damage control*, that is to say, mentoring and advocating for Black students in particular. The phrase *damage control* is significant because it makes visible Daddy's recognition of the damage that the White-dominated schooling system in the U.S. has inflicted on Black children—an education designed by White architects for Black children and put into place as a key component in the maintenance and furthering of White supremacy (Watkins, 2001). The existence of multiculturalism in U.S. public schools underscores the Whiteness of the education proffered therein.

Within today's purportedly race-neutral U.S. society and education, emphasis in dominant official discourse within the White mainstream typically centers on individuals outside of historical context, and thus as ahistorical beings, thereby minimizing the significance of an individual's group membership in structuring each person's life and life chances (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). My father's narrative demonstrates an understanding of Black students as members of a group with a particular group history negatively impacted by the effects of White racism. His approach to education remains conscious of color and grounded within an understanding of the systemic exclusion of Blacks within U.S. society even after racial integration of classrooms occurred and opportunities for race talk became more limited.

As an educator who must do damage control, Daddy viewed his teaching as a means to control and contain, or at least minimize, the injuries systematically inflicted on Black children. Again, we see a Black educator who does not begin with the assumption that Black children and

the Black community are deficient. Recognizing the damage done by the historically White school system, Daddy identified the social structures of White supremacy as the source of his Black students' challenges in the classroom, not their cultural backgrounds or perceived lack of motivation or other types of personal and group-based deficiencies regularly attributed to Black people. My father did not begin, for example, with the assumption that the young brothers are simply thugs and, therefore, angry and hard without reason. Daddy found himself regularly in situations wherein as a Black male himself, he had to do damage control to contain the injury being inflicted on Black youth.

I learned from Daddy that teaching is much more than the delivery of academic facts. It requires recognition and affirmation of the challenges Black students, particularly Black male students, face in classrooms. Further, it requires the purposefully countering of those obstacles. In his teaching, Daddy attempted to break the cycle of Black youth being funneled out of school and into the streets and prisons by talking with them and helping them develop strategies to deal with the disrespect he recognized as legitimate in their lives. I learned from him that we must be interested in not only academic content and test scores, but also in the souls of kids.

### **What I Learned from Daddy: A Critical Autoethnographic Counterstory**

#### **I Won't Do It to Myself**

A statement I heard during the process of collecting data for this paper changed my thoughts about teaching forever. My father stated, "When they desegregated schools, White folk did not have to worry. 'They are going to do it [undermine] to themselves.'" After my experiences in school with assumptions of Black inferiority, I decided then I was going to have to make some changes in my schooling and education. This was the first change in my identity.

My narrative looks at issues of identity, resistance, and what it meant to grow up as a Black man in Mississippi. It takes the reader on a journey of a young man who felt becoming as White-like as possible was the key to success. Working to change the system was not a part of my original thinking. I know now it was me who needed to change, not my students. In my narrative, I share the mentoring and the lessons learned about teaching that I received from my father and how that mentoring and instruction has framed my teaching techniques.

It was not until I began the journey of completing a Ph.D. that my approach toward students changed. I have always been a very demanding teacher with very high expectations, and I will not compromise my position. Because I taught in Salt Lake City, the number of Black students I taught was small in comparison to that in the South. Being a person of color, I shared a common experience with a large number of my students of color. Crossing epistemological boundaries, I now have to take into account language and issues of immigration and class when I develop my teaching approach.

My learning about teaching started long before I became a teacher. As a child, my parents "rode me like a horse" the entire time I was in school. My father had this to say about why he pushed me the way he did:

I want you to be the best. That was the only reason, and I'd done that because I didn't want you to do what I did. I rode you because I wanted you to be all that I wasn't. I rode you because my love for you was so great that I didn't want you to have to do what I did. That's why I rode you. I never had an opportunity to be



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in.... See, I didn't get no manuals. (C. Hayes, personal communication, May 2005)

As a child, I really did not understand why my teachers told me I was doing okay and I was doing okay but not okay for my parents. A teacher told my parents that my B's and C's mostly C's was doing okay and my parents informed this teacher no they are not.

It was not until I became a teacher that I drew on the stories from my father and realized that what went on during my K–12 experiences had now come full circle. My father used to warn me not to settle for the liberal White teachers' comments. When I became a teacher, I began to hear similar comments about students who I knew were much more capable of doing college prep work. My father explained:

The only one situation that happened—at one point, some of the counselors in the school system had preconceived notions that Black boys needed to take a vocational route in order to succeed, and that happened to you. They did track students according to the way the counselor felt the child should go. (C. Hayes, personal communication, May 2005)

It was not until the school system tried to force me into special education—even though I had above-national average scores on all standardized tests, they tried forcing me into a vocational track—that I realized notions of liberalism were not doing me any good. It was not until I started attending Meridian High School and was placed in classes with teachers who did not settle for me being second best that I begin to reach my academic potential. According to my father, these teachers laid the educational foundation. “You received a good education because they recognized the need for education. Those teachers kept the historical foundation of the importance of an education going.”

### **I Won't Let the System Do It to My Students.**

The internalization of Whiteness framed my philosophy when I first started to teach. I first started teaching in Mississippi right after I graduated from Mississippi State. Because of the internalized superiority of Whiteness, I felt that in order for students of color to be successful, they would have to learn how to play the game, which meant, in my mind, not acting Black (Fordham, 1988, 1996; Foster 1990, 1994). I was looking at the students in a deficit mode, thinking it was their fault they weren't successful, an assumption of inferiority based on class and race (O'Connor, 2006).

When I moved to Utah and started teaching in Salt Lake City, I still went into my classroom with a deficit mindset toward students. I still believed they were solely responsible for being the best they could be, and that the reason why they may or may not be was not necessarily something I was doing or not doing. I still believe too many students of color are becoming victims of a school system that does not believe they, especially those who live on the wrong side of the street, can learn at a level comparable to that of White students, another assumption of Black and Brown inferiority (Hayes, 2006; Hayes et al., 2011; O'Connor, 2006).

In addition, I chose to include poor Whites in my quest for change through education. In Salt Lake City, there is clearly a division along class lines. Students who live on the east side of Salt Lake are faring much better academically than their counterparts on the west side. This

division required me to cross epistemological boundaries to look at class and race. My philosophy is still grounded in the belief that students of color, regardless of class, have lower chances of success than White students from a lower socio-economic class.

My approach changed after I enrolled in a master's program at the University of Utah. It was the professors in the department who provided me with a framework to begin criticizing the system and how it was problematic for me to be critical of the students. I realized if I was going to truly be an advocate for students, students of color in particular, I was going to have to critique liberalism and recognize the experiences that my students bring to classroom. It was through this framework that my pedagogy changed. I began teaching students how to fight within the system (*transformative resistance*) and be critical of their oppression, even if it was hidden behind so-called equality and universality. Recognizing the difficulty in this task, my belief was grounded firmly in the principle that if people do not stand for something, they will fall for anything.

My demand for excellence comes from my father. In a lot of ways, the experiential knowledge he brought to the classroom can be seen in my classroom and my teaching. This is what Daddy had to say about what he expected in his classroom:

I just explain that, for example, when the second bell rings, if your butt has not come in contact with the seat, you're tardy. I don't care if you were standing up talking about the Bible or the Quran. I don't care what you're talking about, or who you're talking about. If you're not seated, you're tardy, and that's it. And I punish, so I don't have any problems. (C. Hayes, personal communication, May 2005)

I have always liked his no-nonsense approach to teaching. I believe there are some things that are cut and dry. This is my biggest frustration with the system. I think it gives students too many excuses as to why they cannot succeed and all the reasons and tools to fail, rather than taking what was good from the past and using it as a frame to build the future. For example, Daddy attended segregated schools, and failure was not acceptable. One of the best pieces of advice my father gave me when I started teaching was, "Put the fear of God in them," and they will respect you much more. That statement does not mean to be tyrannical, but firm and fair. My family of educators would say, "Kids want limits," and "They want to feel safe. Part of your responsibility as a teacher is to make them feel safe."

### **Discussion: What Can Educators Learn from My Father?**

For the purposes of this paper, I draw upon the works of Paulo Freire (1973), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), Lisa Delpit (1996), Audre Lorde (1984) and others to develop my working definition of *transformative pedagogy*. Transformative pedagogy refers to an approach or philosophy of teaching accompanied by practices that enable students to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to navigate within, provide socio-political critique of, and foster democratic change within conditions of historical White supremacy. I follow Leonardo (2009) in defining White supremacy as "a racialized social system that upholds, reifies, and reinforces the superiority of Whites" (p. 127).

As I define it, transformative pedagogy has three major components. First, there is equity. Equity is equal access to the most challenging and nourishing educational experiences. We can learn from my father that equity is more than equal representation or physical presence

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within an educational program. Educational equity refers to full participation as a recognized member of a community. Daddy's students and mine had educational inequities; however, we can learn that those inequities do not have to stop us from providing our students with rigorous educational experiences that are not necessarily banking in nature (Delgado Bernal & Solorzano, 2001; Hayes, 2006; Hayes et al., 2011).

Second, there is activism. Activism is a part of transformative pedagogy because it entails preparing students to actively reinsert themselves into public spaces and dialogues to help them gain access to the valued resources and opportunities they have been either excluded from or denied. This activism demands that students have an understanding of the inequities in society and the "how to," in terms of beginning to fix those inequities if necessary.

Lastly, transformative pedagogy as I define it is about social literacy. Social literacy prepares students to acquire the discourse or language necessary to resist the fattening effects of materialism, consumerism, and the power of the abiding evils of White supremacy, thereby nourishing an awareness of one's identity (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009; hooks, 1995; Quijada Cencer et al., 2010).

If we are to bridge the Black-White performance disparities in education that plague our public schools, we must find a different way, a new path, an alternative journey (Ross, Bondy, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2008). Theorizing our lessons and the experiences we draw from allows us to begin imagining and creating a different path and approach to education, one not grounded in assumptions of Black inferiority and White superiority. The lessons from my father, thus, provide the understandings that policymakers need to make sense of why traditionally dominant ways of teaching African American learners continue to fail, and teachers continue to enter the classroom unprepared to teach all students (Knaus, 2009; O'Connor, 2006; Ware, 2006).

There is no magical potion or recipe that pre-service teachers can take or use that will tell them how to change failing schools. I use the term "warm demanders" to describe my father's and my approach with students. What teachers can learn from my father through his pedagogy is a no-nonsense approach to education for those who are expected to fail in school. My father and I are explicit about the importance of education with each student, so they are clear about why they must work hard.

From my father, I learned to affirm the richness of students' own cultural background and histories, something other educators can also learn from him. What distinguishes teachers like my father and me—who are successful with African American learners—is our knowledge of how to apply a dual focus in our teaching. We simultaneously keep the realities of White racism in view as we work against it, and we affirm and draw from the richness of the students' own cultural and historical backgrounds. What can be learned from our narratives is the importance of a dual focus in education that is translated into practice and enacted as an approach to teaching as a form of cultural work. I posit that anyone and everyone, regardless of background, can (and must) learn how to adopt this dual focus to effectively teach all students. In the paragraphs below, I describe briefly how this dual focus might be acquired and applied. Although the examples are a minor tradition within U.S. society and its history, there have always been Whites who have learned to draw on the racial knowledge and understandings collectively generated by people of color—knowledge that does not perpetuate or depend on Whiteness (Aptheker, 1993; Frankenberg, 1993; Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996).

Unfortunately, high expectations, no-nonsense approaches, and culturally familiar communication patterns in education have largely been replaced with "at risk," "low

performing,” “impoverished,” and other deficit-oriented adjectives used to describe African American learners. Teacher education programs likewise turn to scripted programs. For example, Ruby Payne, framed in the apparently multicultural discourse of “if we could all just get along,” presented prescriptive solutions to the tenacious gap in achievement and school performance evidenced between White students and students of color (Bonner, 2009).

If there is one take-away from this section, according to Ware (2006), culturally and politically responsive teachers teach with authority, a form of teaching that includes teaching to the whole child as a member of a particular social group situated within a particular context and history. However, being a warm demander is more than coming into the classroom and demanding a checklist of certain behaviors from students. Effective teaching of African American students is not about implementing a particular step-by-step remedy plan. Black and Latino students, for example, see White teachers arrive in their communities and stand up before them, attempting to teach a curriculum that is already pre-determined and defined in terms of what they need to know. Consequently, the students can answer questions on a standardized test that are likely to have little to no bearing on their actual lived experiences and realities. The teachers, in turn, do not have any connection to the students, and neither does the curriculum they are attempting to teach (Ross et al., 2008).

Teachers cannot be warm demanders by doing drive-by teaching. They must be invested in, deeply familiar with, and able to find and draw on the richness and beauty of the communities in which they teach. Teachers must not go into communities with the mentality to save the students from themselves, their parents, their cultures, or their histories, thus missing the resiliency, richness, and beauty of the ways groups and individuals have learned to cope and thrive within a historical context of near constant race-based hostility and forms of micro-aggressions, sabotage, and assault perpetrated by dominant society.

The paradox of teacher preparation is that most teachers, teacher educators, and future teachers are White. Most White people have developed very little familiarity with or investments in African Americans or any other racial minority community in the U.S. Teacher education in the U.S. is a White world (Juarez, Smith, & Hayes, 2008).

Can a predominantly White field of educators learn from my father as I have? My father and I are both African American men. Logically, then, both of us have—and are more likely to have—the familiarity with and investments in the African American community required for effective teaching of African American learners.

Do teachers, thus, have to be Black to learn from my father’s lessons? Since White people and others from outside of the African American community tend not to have these same connections and familiarity, are they necessarily excluded from the pool of potentially effective teachers of African American learners? My father and I posit that the answer is a resounding, “No!”

First, race is a social construction. People must, therefore, learn their racial identities. While the realities of perceived race and racism are very real and historically embedded, they are not biologically determined. Accordingly, there is no inherent biological or other natural barrier to keep White and other non-Black people from learning from my father as I have.

Second, and accordingly, my father’s lessons constitute an approach to teaching and learning, not a step-by-step formula or recipe. We both view our work as teachers from a particular perspective that includes an awareness of and an activism against White racism. Our students then are explicitly made aware of, know about, and work against assumptions of Black inferiority and White superiority. Hence, my father’s lessons are perspectives and ways of

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thinking about and making sense of the world that can be learned and adopted by anyone regardless of background.

Moreover, educators can learn from my father that teaching is not about technical step-by-step formulas. Teaching cannot be mechanically implemented as a type of technocratic, objective, or rational process. To learn from my father as I have requires educators to understand and interpret his lessons within the context from which they derived and developed. In particular, teachers should learn from his lessons how to develop an awareness of the historical and group context, not the individual as an entity outside of group membership and history (Baldwin, 1985).

The focus of my father's lessons is not simply on the cognitive, psychological wellbeing of students. Instead, they incorporate an awareness of and challenge the ways White racism negatively influences the individual's psychological, social, and other forms of wellbeing. Educators can learn that my father's lessons were not only grounded in knowledge and a critique of White racism, but also acknowledged and validated what DuBois (1924) called the *gifts of Black folks*, or the contributions of African Americans to the making of the United States. In other words, he affirmed the contributions and validity of Black culture, experiences, and history. He did not view his Black students or the surrounding community as a deficient and corrupt version of European American culture.

An awareness of how to infuse history and culture into teaching approaches and practices is critical to my father's lessons. To learn from his lessons like I have, educators must learn to identify, deconstruct, and challenge assumptions of Black inferiority and White superiority. Educators must learn to identify and work against the consequences of White racism that influence students of color and prioritize students who benefit from the systemic privileging of Whiteness presently and historically within U.S. society. We, too, must familiarize ourselves with the gifts of Black folks and develop a vested interest in communities of color—an investment not based on the patronizing and ultimately harmful effects of presuming Whiteness as the normative standard.

### **Conclusion: Successful Teaching for Students of Color as Critical Race Praxis**

Critical race scholars (Stovall, 2004; Stovall, Lynn, Danley, & Martin, 2009; Yamamoto, 1997) suggest that critical race praxis combines critical perspectives and pragmatic approaches to effectively navigate and survive within U.S. society's dominant White mainstream and links them to practices by and for communities of color. This combination results in a type of critical race praxis that provides us with a useful way of gauging innovative approaches to schooling and education of African Americans and other historically disenfranchised communities. Critical race praxis is aimed at giving kids of color the tools required to successfully combat forces pulling them toward the contemporary school-to-prison pipeline and educational failure.

The teaching approaches of my father and I involve a day-to-day engagement of students with issues of social justice, race and racism, and educational equity (Leonardo, 2009; Stovall, 2004) threaded through academic and other forms of learning. Based on the tenet of CRT, which apply the experiential knowledge of communities as a form of engagement, I describe our lived experiences as a survivor of the Jim Crow South and a direct beneficiary of that experience to put into place the non-conventional knowledge necessary for Black students to "make it" in the United States. For me, as the author, the enactment of critical race praxis comes together to produce the kinds of transformative pedagogies I describe in our narratives regarding our

teaching approaches. A transformative pedagogy bridges theoretical concepts of oppression, liberation, and schooling success for freedom to everyday practice.

I try to ameliorate the racial disparities in education that continue to plague students of color in our nation's contemporary public schools. I attempt to follow in the path of my father to enact critical race praxis such as transformative pedagogy (Ross et al., 2008). Theorizing about successful teaching for Black students based on our teaching approaches, educators may begin pushing toward realizing possibilities of imagining and creating different and more democratic paths and approaches to education based on robustly democratic forms of teaching and learning. Our perspectives on successful teaching for Black students helpfully illuminate how classrooms in public schools might begin to be transformed into anti-racist educational spaces not based on the contingencies of a society organized around Whiteness, but instead on a vision of teaching and learning for freedom dreams (Juarez & Hayes, 2012). I conclude by hoping that my father's and my experiences can help the education community better understand what possibilities for that vision of teaching and learning for freedom dreams might look like as we examine these perspectives on successful teaching of Black students.

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### **Note**

1. Brothers is a term used here in reference to young African American male students.