

# Perspective Divergence and the Mis-education of Black Boys...Like Me

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*The acquisition of knowledge in a classroom characterized by the frequent exchange of ideas is filtered through multiple socio-cultural perspectives. These perspectives shape the social and cultural norms teachers use to negotiate professional interactions with students, families, and colleagues. This essay develops the concept of perspective divergence to examine how differences in the social and cultural perspectives between teachers and students, in this case Black males, can significantly limit the teacher's capacity to bolster positive student outcomes. Woodson's (1933/2011) mis-education thesis is used to name the reasons for the disjuncture in perspective between Black teachers and Black students, through an exploration of one Black male's teaching practice in Chicago. This autoethnography emphasizes the development of a pedagogy that a) accounts for the creativity and innovation of Black youth and b) prioritizes instructional alternatives that counter hegemonic educational norms meant to control student thinking and behavior, usurp agency, replace student values, and diminish student goals.*

*Keywords:* African-American, Black, education, hegemony, teacher

*In the first place, we must bear in mind that the Negro has never been educated. He has merely been informed about other things, which he has not been permitted to do. The Negroes have been shoved out of the regular schools through the rear door into the obscurity of the backyard and told to imitate others whom they see from afar, or they have been permitted in some places to come into the public schools to see how others educate themselves. The program for the uplift of the Negro in this country must be based upon a scientific study of the Negro from within to develop in him the power to do for himself what his oppressors will never do to elevate him to the level of others. (Woodson, 1933/2011, p. 99)*

Woodson's (1933/2011) words are sharp, but germane to the personal and professional preparation of Black teachers to teach in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many of us who identify as Black or African-American (I use the two terms interchangeably) who have chosen to teach in communities of color feel the great responsibility of our decision. As professionals, we are charged with communicating instructional content in an intellectually engaging, personally relevant, and culturally appropriate way. Dually, as persons of color, we do our best to prepare

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## PERSPECTIVE DIVERGENCE

students by giving them tools we *think* will best equip them for navigating the systems of inequality we have seemingly overcome. Still, there is conflict between doing what we perceive to be best for traditionally marginalized student populations, and contending with the multiple restrictions of the high-stakes instructional demands placed on us by our schools and school districts.

Woodson's (1933/2011) "Mis-Education" thesis holds that individuals of African descent educated in the "oppressor's" schools have not been adequately educated. Rather, they have simply been taught to use the oppressor's tools to further subordinate members of their own race in various domains of leadership (e.g., church, civic, business, education). The Harvard and University of Chicago educated Woodson was schooled within the exact same network of oppression that he insists, "depresses and crushes ... the spark of genius in the negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples" (p. 5). Woodson understands intimately the ease with which Blacks can adopt the oppressors' social and cultural perspective of the world, as well as the oppressors' view of their own place in the world. Doing so can have a tremendous adverse impact on the effectiveness of Black leaders and Black teachers' capacity to engage in a critical, culturally liberating praxis. Similarly, there is a fundamental gulf between the knowledge, social, and cultural capital Black boys bring to school and that of the teachers who educate them, *even* when those teachers look like them. This amounts to a form of collusion, as Woodson argues, in which Black teachers perpetuate and maintain racial subordination in subtle, invisible ways. His awareness of these phenomena over seven decades ago raises plausible concerns for contemporary Black educators should we be truly committed to improving the life outcomes of Black youth, particularly Black males.

Woodson's work causes me to reflect critically on my own education, teacher preparation, and subsequent teaching career. My beliefs regarding "good" school behavior, the challenges, benefits, and realities of obtaining an education in today's society differed significantly from those of the young people I taught. There is a "language of power" I acquired during my education that Delpit (1995) argues disproportionately disadvantages people of color by muting their desires, voices, and visions of success. I adopted, internalized, and practiced regurgitating that "language," even when doing so impeded on my own positive racial identity development. As a result, I acquired professional habits and points of view unconsciously aimed at assimilating Black students to more successfully navigate a world that strongly values Eurocentric forms of speech, dress, and knowledge. My pedagogy failed to appreciate the genius and creativity of the Black students I taught, especially the Black males. The problem, as I have now come to see it, was that my actions were more likely to produce similar outcomes to those achieved by my White colleagues who seemingly did not know better.

### Method

In the autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to follow, I explore the relevance of Woodson's (1933/2011) "Mis-Education" thesis to my own career as a middle and high school math teacher. I critique my own pedagogical beliefs and those of my colleagues and administrators, to uncover the ease with which I unconsciously reproduced inequitable schooling conditions for Black children, despite sharing their race. My personal narrative outlines challenges I had to overcome and moments of revelation, which led me to be more critical of the gaps between students' social and cultural perspectives and my own. This work is a form of

counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) that critically disaggregates my experiences and leads to a necessary reevaluation of the approaches, strategies, and philosophies that shaped my professional practice. These meta-reflections on my teaching career represent a pushing back against the various decisions I made in my work with Black students.

Woodson’s (1933/2011) monograph helps me name the disjuncture between my own perspective of the teaching and learning process, the perspectives of my superiors, and those of my students. A brief description of perspective divergence follows in the next section. The remainder of the essay recounts the specific professional experiences and interactions, which contributed to my own perspective divergence, and provides recommendations for minimizing this phenomenon.

### Analytic Framework

*Perspective divergence* (PD) represents the disparity in social and cultural perspectives two or more person groups employ to interpret ideas, actions, and behaviors associated with a particular condition or situation. In essence, it is the difference in the lenses of interpretation individuals use to make sense of a particular problem, issue, or circumstances, and these lenses are formed by the intersection of our subjective identities (e.g. age, gender, race, religion, class, position of authority, etc.). The three areas of PD shown in Figure 1 diminish one’s ability to connect genuinely on an interpersonal level with Black students. PD results from teachers’ failure to understand students’ ideological, philosophical, and experiential outlooks on the schooling process. This theoretical framework was developed through an examination of my own professional experiences teaching in predominately Black schools serving low-income communities in Chicago.

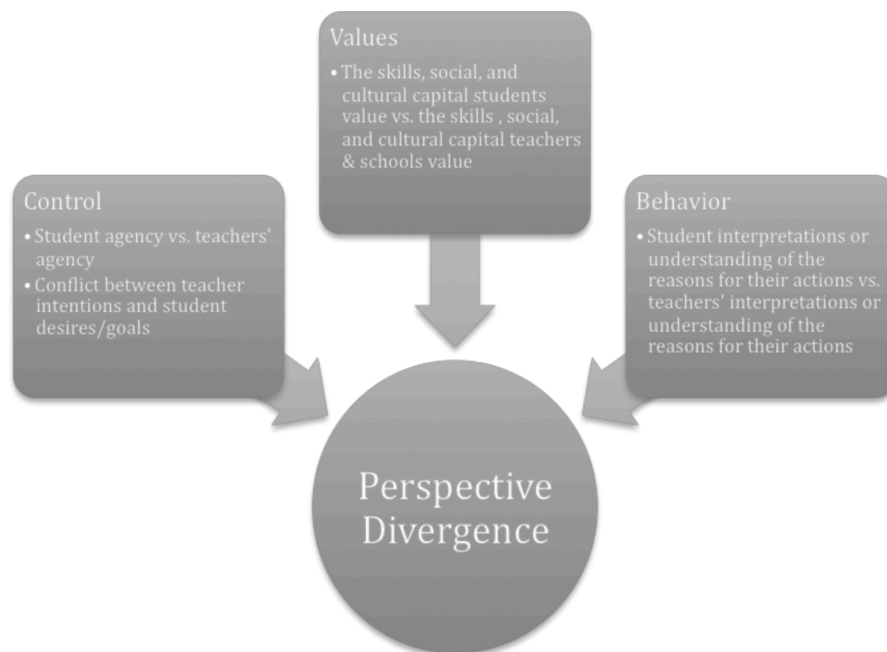


Figure 1. Perspective Divergence Conceptual Model

## PERSPECTIVE DIVERGENCE

Years earlier, Jones and Nisbett (1971) theorize the *actor-observer difference*, or the disparate perceptions held by observers and actors of the *cause* of the actor's behavior. In the context of this study, students are the actors while the teacher is the observer. For instance, teachers tend to evaluate student academic performance based on the actions and habits of the student. The teacher's judgment typically only accounts for the physical actions, or the behavior of the actor, such as the student's failure to complete homework and his or her tardiness to class. Teachers do this to maintain fairness, priding themselves on their ability to treat all kids the same. The student, on the other hand, may attribute his or her behavior to the context, or the external conditions outside of the student's control. Examples of external conditions might include the warmth of teacher-student interactions or the perceived distrusting nature of the teacher (see Jones & Nisbett, 1971). There is a clear difference in perspective related to interpreting the origin of the student's academic outcomes, which in this case may be a low grade in the class. Both parties likely have conflicting explanations for a student's poor performance. Given the degree of power teachers have for evaluating student performance and the impact teacher expectations have on that performance, the disparity in student-teacher perspective ultimately hurts the student (Good & Brophy, 2000).

### **Personal/Professional Journey**

With about a decade of professional experience under my belt, I read Woodson's (1933/2011) *Mis-Education of the Negro* for the first time as an advanced doctoral student. At times, I felt empowered and affirmed, and other times angry and confused. I was in my second year as an instructional leader, coaching and mentoring teachers, and although I was no longer teaching full time, I was responsible for ensuring high-quality instruction everyday. Woodson's words challenged me to think much deeper about my practice.

Before reading this book, I had not thought very critically about the actual frames of reference used to organize my teaching practice or the implications of being Black and teaching Black children. I use the word *critical* throughout this essay to refer to one's acknowledgement of power and privilege in relationship to other stakeholders. Some might refer to this as *critical pedagogy* (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1998). I also use the term to signify a sober philosophical and ideological examination of one's belief system to understand how we come to know what we know about the world around us. Control, behavior, and values are the three areas of perspective divergence between education institutional stakeholders and their students that will be highlighted in this text. Woodson (1933/2011) laments that the more educated a Black man becomes, the more likely he is to exchange the perspectives of his people (his race) for those of the dominant group, thus implicating himself as a covert ally to the oppressor. It is easy to fail to notice when we are reproducing dominant perspectives, believing that we are doing what is best for students. A discrepancy in perspective on these three issues of relevance to the pedagogical process leads to a clash between teachers' intentions and the product of their academic, behavioral, and social interactions with students.

### **Perspective Divergence: Control**

Woodson (1933/2011) asserts that, "When you control a man's thinking you don't have to worry about his actions" (p. 5). The key word here is control. "How had I been socialized to control students?" I thought to myself. Early in my career I never asked students what they

wanted for themselves, what their passions and desires were. I never asked them to dream or to point out what they believed was most important for them to accomplish in life. I dictated to them what I thought was important for them. When I did, a majority of Black students would either name an athlete or entertainer they planned to emulate. Of course, I did not agree, oftentimes frustrated by their responses.

When I began my teaching career, my intention was to prepare as many Black children as I could to be college-ready. I had an agenda. All teachers do, even if it is not something we express explicitly. Going to college was powerful for shifting the generational curses of poverty that plagued my family, so I thought that college attendance ought to be every student's goal – a reasonable assumption on my part. Postsecondary education *is* important, but this goal had nothing to do with students, their goals, their interests, or their aspirations. Teachers are thought to be instrumental for helping students discover their passions, but in reality, teachers are not celebrated or appreciated for our ability to do this. We focus on doing whatever it takes to ensure more students “meet” and “exceed” standards on the state test.

When I think back, I was trained to do the thinking for students, not to encourage them to think for themselves. The school set the instructional goals and priorities based on the district's bottom line for that year – often determined by the politics of the sitting mayor. My job was to assess student deficits and design a plan to improve academic outcomes. I had considerable autonomy for deciding what knowledge is imperative for inclusion in each lesson, what examples to use, and how to implement learning objectives. I then required students to reproduce, represent, or re-present that knowledge in various forms of convenience for me. My practice failed to strategically account for or inquire about the tensions students might have had with the content or my instructional delivery.

Analogous to a vending machine, teachers put knowledge in like a coin into the coin slot. Once we have put in enough knowledge (money), we expect a specific outcome. The problem with this is that we are dealing with humans, not machines. Yet our effectiveness is tied up in our ability to produce mechanical outcomes without accounting for the humanity and within-group diversity of our students. Like the vending machine, we attempt to control student outcomes. The reality is that we cannot.

It is difficult to respond to the humanity of your students when, as the teacher, you too are being controlled and manipulated. I had a job I was hired to do. I did not have time to consult with students about what was important to them. I was Black, teaching Black students, and that was all the cultural relevance I needed, or so I thought. The divergence in perspective I brought to my classroom as a result of my teacher training was further exacerbated by the feelings of inadequacy and racial subordination I experienced in the workplace.

The first teaching job I held was at a popular national charter school chain on Chicago's west side. I was the only Black faculty member in the building. I was hired as the 7<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher of the school's inaugural graduating class almost immediately after my interview. What mattered most to the principal, a White male with about two years' teaching experience via Teach for America, was that I knew my content and that I could manage a classroom. He cared very little about whether I built relationships with the students or that I had a working knowledge of the community where I taught, as Woodson (1933/2011) exhorts teachers and leaders to do. The principal did not ask those questions. It seemed he was impressed by my Big Ten pedigree, high cumulative grade point average, and the range of professional experiences I had prior to my application to the school. It became clear after the first month of school that none of these things

## PERSPECTIVE DIVERGENCE

really mattered either. He saw my work in one particular way, and anything outside of his purview created considerable conflict between us.

It was important to live up to the principal's expectations as not to be viewed as insubordinate. So, I conceded to his requests whenever he made them, against my better judgment. This principal successfully manipulated my interactions with students under the guise of instructional accountability. Daily, he micromanaged how I arranged my chalkboard, situated my desks, articulated the learning objective, and interacted with my 100% Black students. He wanted my practice to look like his, and it made for a miserable teaching experience.

I rationalized his domination by often telling myself, "If I just follow directions, he can't fire me or write a bad recommendation." Little by little I lost the explosive creativity characteristic of my teaching philosophy and prior experiences working with youth. I eventually became unwilling to take risks in class. He would say to me in passing, "That activity is too audacious a task for you," or "Whatever you do, if these kids don't make at least two years' gain this year, it's your fault." My self-esteem was shot. I had become accustomed to exceeding expectations to demonstrate parity in intellect with my White colleagues during my undergraduate experience. However, this was different. The harder I tried to prove my worth, the worse the experience became. Simultaneously, as the only Black professional in the building, I wanted to avoid stereotypes that I perceived shaped how others saw me. I did not realize the toll "just following instructions" was having on my early success as a teacher.

Just before Christmas break; upon our return from Thanksgiving, the principal announced a reorganization of teaching assignments. I was no longer the 7<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher. My new assignment was now *assistant* to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher. After working an average of fourteen hours everyday, I was instantly demoted right in front of my students, without any prior notice. After the initial shock, I thought to myself, "It all makes sense now." That morning, I had shown up to my classroom with a renewed sense of commitment, only to find my instructional materials gone from the walls, replaced by math algorithm posters chosen by the school's Dean of Students, and my new replacement. I went into the assembly already devastated. Afterwards, I could add, "embarrassed" to the list of emotions rushing through my person. At the end of that same week, he released me from my contract with two full months' severance pay.

The story ended well in my case. But I have seen this scenario played out time and time again, destroying the efficacy of capable, motivated Black teachers. If teachers are controlling, it is not necessarily because we are trying to be, but oftentimes because *we* are being controlled. We are pulled in one direction and another simultaneously. Even though I made it through this ordeal, there were wounds that remained with me for the remainder of my teaching career. At some point, we have to stop to evaluate the integrity of our work, and ask why we got into teaching and how we can manage the perspective divergence and other contradictions that result from our intention to be good employees.

My teacher preparation led me to believe that I needed to reproduce myself – Black kids who speak, think, and act in a way that makes them palatable to White America. Sometimes administrators, at least from my experience, reinforce this notion because they were once teachers who did the same thing, and the cycle continues. Woodson (1933/2011) argues that education is only liberating if students are being taught to be their authentic selves. Likewise, learning to shift control from teacher to student requires a redistribution of power that takes courage and a pushing back against oppressive systems (and people). This form of risk-taking only works when the teacher is able to demonstrate outcomes, though. Woodson's work, at the very least, raised the consciousness in me that there *was* a gap worth noting. One must negotiate

the divergence of perspective around control delicately, so as not to compromise the rigor of the learning environment. The task of even determining rigor and what it looks like in practice, however, is a matter of control that should be discussed, vetted, and considered alongside the unique needs of stakeholders in the school and community being served.

### **Perspective Divergence: Values**

During my years as a middle school math teacher, at any given moment outside class time, you might find a White female teacher in my classroom sobbing or discussing why she could not get the kids to act one way or another. Values were a common theme. Questions such as, “Why aren’t the parents more involved?” or “Why won’t student X complete any of my homework assignments?” implied that the students and their families had values different from the ones the teacher held. There was a pervasive, yet covert belief, that these Black students, especially the Black males, did not value school or learning. It was evident in the number of discipline referrals they received and the way these students were discussed in the teachers’ lounge.

Similarly, I had never questioned how I came to know what I thought I knew about these same students and their experiences. I assumed, because I was Black, that I understood my students, because they were Black. My White colleagues carried the same assumptions. In actuality, what I believed I knew about my Black students, I had constructed as a third party observer. The students and I were not the same age. I did not grow up where they were growing up. I had economic stability when many of their parents did not. As I reflect, there was little difference between the perspectives I had about those students and the perspectives my White colleagues held. A key difference, however, was that I was very conscious that these youths were a representation of me as a Black man. That consciousness added significantly to my commitment to the work of educating them, regardless of how challenging it was.

Early on, my values tended to drive a preponderance of my professional decision-making. For example, as a Christian, I abhorred excessive conversations about students’ sexual escapades, so they were not allowed to talk about those things in my classroom. I enjoyed well-mannered interactions with students. They were required to follow my directions the first time I said them because that is what the adults in my life had taught me. I valued straight rows and the buzzing of pencils on paper as a sign of productivity. I placed students in narrow categories constructed to accommodate the Eurocentric sensibilities and antiquated child development theories I had acquired during my teacher preparation. These perspectives worked out fine if the students fit in the boxes I created for them. After all, those boxes were constructed based on personal experience and what I *felt* was good behavior. But I found that when students do not meet our expectations, teachers are faced with a serious dilemma of how to motivate each young person to reach his or her highest potential.

Sadly, from my experience, too many talented Black teachers take one of two routes in this situation. We either become gatekeepers, by telling Black students, “I got mine, you gotta get yours,” in reference to educational attainment, or worse, we leave the field altogether for a more lucrative career choice—frustrated that teaching was not what we thought it would be. Once again, Woodson warns against this.

One Monday morning in early December, after abruptly being released from my contract at the charter school, I found myself in the main office of a small, public neighborhood elementary school in the North Lawndale community of Chicago. The assistant principal, a

## PERSPECTIVE DIVERGENCE

seemingly flustered, over-worked African-American gentleman asked me nonchalantly upon his brisk entrance into the office, “Are you here to interview for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade position?” I nodded affirmatively, “Yes, sir.” He looked me in the eye and leaned in with a straight face, “Can you start today?” Dumbfounded by his unexpected query, I thought to myself, “You don’t even know me!” Without hesitation, he ushered me into an interview with the older, Black female principal, Dr. Rogers.

I walked in to her office to greet her. She stood there standing erect gripping my resume to the left of the big oak conference table. Upon hearing me introduce myself, her first words were, “I see you went to a Tier 1 university; you did fairly well there, but can you teach? I need a strong Black man who can teach those kids.” In trying to digest her words, I pondered about my last teaching experience: Could I really teach? My confidence had taken quite a hit at the last school. I felt my teacher identity had not been fully developed. I was insecure. Nonetheless, I said, “Yes!”

I was the fifth teacher for this class of eighteen students and it was only the second week of December. Several of the students had been retained in 8<sup>th</sup> grade once and a couple of students had even been held back two times. The class I took over was *self-contained*, meaning I was responsible for planning and teaching each of the core subjects. Students traditionally switch classes in middle school, but because mine did not, I felt like I had to jump through multiple hoops to keep the students engaged.

I had only been teaching this class for three hours when Janetta verbally assaulted me, passionately branding me as “Motherfucker.” On another occasion, Dennis, her ex-boyfriend in the same class, made the mistake of discussing with a classmate that had sexual relations with one of the other girls in our small class the night before. I am sure he thought twice as Janetta started swinging my large, rectangular prism-shaped electric pencil sharpener uncontrollably, like a wrangle used for bull herding, towards his head. I thought to myself, “Where is her home training and how fast can I get the hell out of here?” As Dr. Rogers had pointed out, these students needed something different than what they previously had in a teacher. She was confident in my ability to be that difference.

I dressed impeccably each day. After all, “these students,” I languished, “need to see a well-dressed, well-spoken Black man.” I wore pressed button-up shirts and nice slacks made from quality material with a sweater vest or tie each day. My accessories completed the ensemble with a touch of panache. If I wore black shoes, I made sure to carry my black leather briefcase to match, and vice-versa for the days I donned my brown loafers. For the most part my students appreciated and took pride in seeing me dressed up. So much so, they eventually became fashion police, always providing unwarranted critiques and alerting me to my wardrobe blunders. I taught several of my students how to tie a tie for the first time. My physical presentation mattered, and taking this position is a decision I do not regret.

There were also times when my persona created tension for certain male students because of their perceptions of me as inauthentically Black. They would accuse me of thinking that I was better than them because I wore nice clothes and spoke using “proper” English. I was different from the Black men with whom they had regular interaction, the men they looked up to and admired. I took so much pride in my appearance because I was opposed to how students were dressed and wanted to provide them a wider range of images of success. I never once inquired about how *they* thought about success. Furthermore, and most importantly, I never invested time to study the alternate models of success students held. Being educated and accomplished allowed me the privilege to hold myself apart from the visions of success students held dear.



I had to figure out a way to connect the skill sets and the social and cultural capital Black males brought to school to the lessons I prepared for their consumption. Acknowledging the difference between us explicitly and honestly while simultaneously esteeming and affirming the student's viewpoints was imperative. I am not sure that I knew how to do that, though, because I had tunnel vision. I ask myself now, "Who has the most responsibility to change and adjust? The teacher or the student?" I would say it is the teacher. We do not change so much by accepting the values students bring to school, but by allowing room for more inquiry, more time to negotiate value systems, ultimately to produce the most beneficial outcomes for them. Minimizing perspective divergence in this case means allowing room for students and teachers to pose critical questions of one another and to the institution to determine what knowledge is valuable in the academic space.

Acknowledgment of difference is the first thing; reframing that difference in a way that demonstrates to the students that who they are is cool and worthwhile will facilitate the change in the teacher that is needed to improve the quality of student-teacher interactions. How we view difference, either as an asset or a liability, is a decision we make as teachers. I had to make my teaching palpable and relevant to their everyday realities. I could only do that by partnering with them to make sense of what they value (e.g., trust, loyalty, care, love) and allow those things to drive the student-teacher relationship. The process involves uncovering how these values are translated to the boys and then making a conscious effort to communicate these values in culturally congruent ways.

### **Perspective Divergence: Behavior**

The teaching and learning process is physical. The situation with Janetta was one of many turbulent interactions I had with students. I realized fairly quickly that being offended rarely helps improve the situation when a student has done something to insult me. Being disrespectful to an adult is not the adult's problem; it is the student's problem. Simply put, an emotional response by the teacher does not cut to the root of the student behavior; it inflames that behavior.

Just because a student or a parent shared my skin color, it did not necessarily mean they had the same moral convictions or saw the genesis of a student's academic, social, or behavioral outcomes the same way I did. I learned to ask myself before reacting, "What is going on in this child's life that suggests to them that it is okay to act the way he is?" Redistributing power requires teachers to retire personal philosophy by stepping back and becoming vulnerable to the perspectives of the subordinate, or the student.

Reading Woodson's work caused me to ask how I came to know the difference between disrespect and critique. Receiving harsh student feedback for unclear directions was not disrespectful. Sometimes, it means they care so much that they feel the consequences of failure in their physical body. Thus, they react physically—the outward acting out of their internal frustrations which may include walking out of class, putting their head down, engaging in a power struggle of some sort, or completely withdrawing from the activity at hand. Students will not always know how to say, "Mr. Warren, your instructions are unclear. Can you re-explain what you want us to do?" Adults have developed politeness over time, and some of us still struggle with it. You do have to teach students how to communicate with others in a respectful way, but when they do not, this is not an opportunity to cast them as miscreants. This does them no good, nor does it promote the desired behavior. Assigning labels such as "at risk" tends to

## PERSPECTIVE DIVERGENCE

shade our perspective negatively. These perspectives undoubtedly influence how we approach interactions with that child. I had to shift my thought process to see that these students were doing what they felt, as teachers often do, in order to produce the most favorable outcome for themselves.

Every week during my literacy block, we spent at least half an hour talking about whatever the kids wanted to talk about, against district mandates to spend the first 90 minutes of each day doing balanced literacy. I learned to let them tell their stories without judgment. I gave students a platform to perform comedy and/or rap their favorite hip-hop lyrics. Every algebraic algorithm had an accompanying rhyme and rhythm, which made for a noisy classroom most days. I would “ear hustle” during lunch by eavesdropping on their conversations, taking note of what new drama was going down in the neighborhood, including who was dating whom. As Woodson (1933/2011) suggests, I needed to learn about the students I taught, by meeting them where they were. Do not get me wrong, this is not a substitute for high expectations, but in order to reverse the divergence of perspective, you have to assume that the students offer a perspective *you* need as the teacher. As it relates to behavior, doing these things to acquire perspective was my way of better comprehending the source, or root, of the reasons they performed behaviorally in the manner they did.

I was trained well. I knew my content. I knew the mechanics of teaching. I knew how to set up a classroom to make it conducive to high-quality instruction, but I was not trained to communicate with students. Without knowing students through their eyes, there is little recourse for understanding their behavior. You can consult books, but those books likely do not include the back stories of the youth sitting right in front of you every day. The effectiveness of my instruction rested primarily on my ability to frame the learning according to what mattered most to students, an understanding that was never static, but always in a state of flux.

Needless to say, Dr. Rogers was not happy when I decided to leave the school to become the founding math teacher of the nation’s first public high school for boys. The school opened its doors to about 150 Black males mostly from the Englewood neighborhood on Chicago’s south side. I will not recount here the abundance of literature documenting U.S. public schools’ failure to educate Black boys. I choose to say it this way because Black males have not failed schools; schools have failed Black males. This is a necessary distinction for understanding Black male school vulnerability, and to avoid using a deficit perspective of Black males.

Certain problem behaviors, like degrading uses of the word “gay,” were condoned, while other behaviors were sanctioned, without much consensus among faculty members. There was no faculty handbook. Each teacher did as he saw fit, which made for gross inconsistencies in discipline at the classroom and school level. We had no in-depth discussions about notions of manhood, masculinity, or gender performance, yet each adult had their own conception they passed on to students. These conversations and the insensitive words and actions of my Black male colleagues were problematic for making the school environment a safe space for *all* students. The lack of consensus around these issues, which was critical to the boys’ social and intellectual development, points to our obliviousness to the diversity within our 100% Black male student body.

I believed in each young man’s potential to become a great contributor to society despite their many misrepresentations in mainstream media. Simultaneously, I assumed that their saggy pants, inappropriate language, grammatical slips, and apparent aversion to authority were evidence of their lack of guidance, support, and access to positive male role models. Referring to a string of thefts and juvenile behavior, I asked the students one day in a frustrated tone, “Why

won't you all just tell? Write a note, see me after school, send up a smoke signal, something. Just report the people who are ruining things in our school for the rest of you." One of the boys spoke up emphatically saying, "Snitches get stitches." Confounded by the reference, I pleaded with the class to explain this concept to me. Another student volunteered to share,

Mr. Warren, in our 'hood, if you snitch, that's your life. If you tell the police who's selling drugs, that brings heat to the block. Bringing heat to the block means the dealer can't sell. If he can't sell, he can't provide. If he can't provide, he may try to sell on somebody else's territory, which can lead to turf wars.

I am paraphrasing here, but the student's explanation was so clear, so logical, and so completely thoughtful. They connected the dots for me in a way I could understand – even though the concept had been completely foreign to me. From my perspective, identifying the culprit is a way to improve the "community," and keep the peace. For students, their perspectives on this behavior and others do not change just because they are inside the school. Their perspectives should not necessarily *have to* change because when they leave the school building students have to navigate those same neighborhoods teachers have the privilege of avoiding. The conversation we had that day about snitches completely transformed policy and social interactions in my classroom.

Students tend to be closer to real life than adults. I had learned to operate inside a bubble, created by an education system designed to inferiorize people who look like me. Thus, my early student-teacher interactions led to a habit of mislabeling and misreading students' capabilities. I made rash judgments about their intentions toward learning. Even when I knew better, I had conditioned myself to function within a Eurocentric epistemology that made seeing the truth of the cultural difference between my students and I a liability rather than an asset. The challenge is to see life through their eyes while projecting the greatness of their untapped potential.

### **Recommendations for Personal/Professional Transformative Practice**

To minimize perspective divergence, Black teachers must transform how they think about their professional work with Black males and Black students, in general. My own transformation began on the ground with students in practice. Trial and error functioned as tools of discovery. I uncovered methods to merge students' social and cultural perspective with my own. In doing so, I had to freely hand over my privilege as the teacher, and value students enough to convert my classroom into a space conducive for fluid, reflexive knowledge exchange. With the help of Woodson's (1933/2011) writing, I continue to change my conceptions, as an academician, professor, and education consultant, of the teaching and learning process for Black students.

There are three platforms for pedagogical transformation teachers may engage to minimize perspective divergence in the areas described in this paper. These platforms are opportunities for professional advocacy necessary to mediate the myriad of conflicts resulting from disparities in points of view. First, all teachers, but especially Black teachers, have a responsibility to challenge the role of education institutions to subordinate, manipulate, or control Black children. Also, teachers should help students find their creative and critical voice by intentionally modeling these virtues. Finally, educators must not assume that they know or understand everything about the youth they teach simply because they share the student's race and/or gender. Take students as they are and seek out strong cultural references, examples, role

## PERSPECTIVE DIVERGENCE

models, and affirming images to counter deficit-laden pathologies of Black males, and Black students, put forth in mainstream media, textbooks, and other instructional aids.

Each platform varies in difficulty for implementation depending on a number of factors. The teacher's life experiences matter in how he or she embraces and engages each platform. Teachers' concept of self and their political position in the institution matter as well. Transformation is a decision that not all Black teachers will believe they need to make. My goal for providing these recommendations is simply to bring awareness of Woodson's (1933/2011) analysis and admonitions, and demonstrate how his words maintain relevance to today's schooling of Black youth. Interpret these and apply them as you see fit. Discuss them and find your happy medium, but whatever you do, do something.

### **Critical Understanding of the Institution**

*The large majority of educated Negroes in the United States have accepted segregation, and have become its fearless champions. They're filled but undeveloped minds do not enable them to understand that, although an opiate furnishes temporary relief, it does not remove the cause of the pain.... In our so-called democracy we are accustomed to give the majority what they want rather than educate them to understand what is best for them. (Woodson, 1933/2011, p. 69)*

Settling for the status quo is an unfortunate consequence of the many years of oppression that African-American people have endured. As Bell (1980) convincingly argues with his "interest convergence" principle, Black folks only receive the benefits of policies and legislation that complement the hidden agenda(s) of the dominant race. Teachers must *collectively* aspire to create a more equitable schooling system. We must learn from schools that are defying the odds, and the research that documents their success. No more investing excessive time, energy, or resources in people, research, and projects whose findings merely amplify the obstacles facing Black youth.

African-American educators must advocate for Black youth by vigilantly scrutinizing the policies, procedures, ideologies, and cultural ethos existing in their schools. Scholars including Ladson-Billings and Tate (1997), Lynn (1999), as well as Dixson and Rousseau (2006), instruct us about how to identify the presence of racism in schools. Serve on a school-wide committee(s) no one else wants to serve on. Supervise a daily homework club, work in Saturday school, and structure these programs to be a resource to parents and community stakeholders, alike. The cooperative investment of multiple teachers will undoubtedly relieve the burden of the one or two teachers in a school who may already be engaged in such initiatives. Become a part of the decision-making body by demanding access and disrupting the cycles of inequality that persist covertly.

### **Engage in a Liberating Pedagogical Praxis**

*If you teach the Negro that he has accomplished as much good as any other race he will aspire to equality and justice without regard to race. Such an effort would upset the program of the oppressor. (Woodson, 1933/2011, p. 130)*

*A thinking man, however, learns to deal wisely with conditions as he finds them rather than to take orders from someone who knows nothing about his status and cares less.* (Woodson, 1933/2011, p. 132)

Woodson dares us to produce thinkers by creating an intellectual space where teachers center their practice on student faculties. Teachers need to extend, extrapolate from, and build upon the social, political, and cultural context to bridge gaps in perspective. Young people typically spend more time outside of school than inside. They already have the tools and worldview teachers need to spark the light of genius in each one of them. Our task is, as Woodson (1933/2011) says, to “begin with life as *they* find it [emphasis added]” and “to deal wisely with conditions as *he* finds them [emphasis added]” (p. 24). Celebrate the manner in which students pose questions and help them hone that ability as a way to bring change to projects of local importance to them.

Abstain from coercing students to think, act, and/or look the same. Teachers must push students to identify multiple alternatives and routes to the same or similar outcomes. Student-teacher relationships are very important in this regard (Gay, 2010). These are relationships built on trust. Be humble and unafraid of adapting behavior and professional decisions to meet students where they are. Be reminded that students bring experiences and perspectives that enrich the learning environment. Develop strategic approaches to acquiring that perspective and then use the new knowledge to inform subsequent professional decision-making.

### **Reward and Model Creative and Innovative Thinking**

*If the Negro in the ghetto must eternally be fed by the hand that pushes him into the ghetto, he will never become strong enough to get out of the ghetto.... When we can build as well as live in houses; when we can make as well as wear shoes; when we can produce as well as consume wheat, corn, and rye—then we shall become valuable to society.* (Woodson, 1933/2011, p. 74)

Students are taught subliminally by the time they enter third grade that creativity is not convenient or valuable, due to the increased attention they see given in school to preparation for standardized tests. The imbalance of structured vs. free-flowing activities in the range of instructional experiences does a disservice to students. We can not expect students to become innovators when they have only been taught how to follow directions.

Analogously, many teachers are also asked to simply follow directions. Teachers are rarely rewarded for posing and solving problems pertinent to the school’s function. Pushing back on this point involves risk taking of the highest order. This platform might be the most sophisticated of them all. Creating instructional models and innovative pedagogical strategies that esteem, affirm, and emphasize the brilliance and creativity of Black children is not easy. However, this is the crux of our responsibility for leading school reform in the U.S.—we must model the reform we seek. Be daring, but think through every step of the process. Student performance will be the greatest recompense.

### Conclusion

*The real servant of the people must live among them, think with them, feel for them, and die for them.... He will be more concerned with what he can do to increase the ease, comfort, and happiness of the Negro than with how the Negro may be used to contribute to the ease, comfort, and happiness of others.... Unlike the leader, [the servant of the people] is not on a high horse elevated above the people and trying to carry them to some designated point to which he would like to go for his own advantage. The servant of the people is down among them, living as they live, doing what they do, and enjoying what they enjoy. (Woodson, 1933/2011, pp. 88 – 89)*

Carter Godwin Woodson is one of many African-American male exemplars in history deserving of our admiration for his persistence towards academic success. He used his intellect to serve, his writing to empower, and his life to inspire. Woodson, despite being dually African and American in early 20<sup>th</sup> century United States, achieved the highest levels of educational excellence as a theoretician and scholar. Woodson's personal narrative of success should not be measured by his attainment of some lofty, privileged social position, but rather for the significance of his many contributions to the humanization of Black people in America. Let Woodson's life be a baseline for our own. Reflection on my educational trajectory has been largely impacted by Woodson's words. The professoriate provides a space for me to shed light on issues so easily overlooked by our own good intentions. It is my hope that my story reminds all teachers, but especially Black teachers, to encourage authentic expression and create a platform for its display, as well as to adopt student perspectives and make use of those perspectives in every lesson you teach and every interaction you have. Being Black and choosing to teach Black kids is not enough. We have to advocate policies and pedagogical practices that humanize the learning experiences of Black youth, chiefly Black males. The call is clear. What will be your response?

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