

*The following contains two entries: one being an essay that I wrote back at the start of my praxis project, and the other being my current response to what I wrote then. I write this way because I find great personal value in visiting and revisiting what I have previously written. It is a space for my past self to affirm and challenge the thinking of my present self and vice-versa. I feel that my perspective has grown and changed greatly within the year that separates these two entries, just as I have grown and changed greatly, and I want my Theories of Understanding to be a reflection of this. My ways of understanding, after all, have changed and will continue to change again and again throughout the rest of my life.*

Will McKeon

24 March 2020

Love, Trust and Self

In her book *Cultivating Genius*, Dr. Ghouldy Muhammad ties literact directly to “joy, love and aesthetic fulfillment” (Muhammad 2020). For her, teaching is at its heart a labor of love. In order to effectively teach, one can and must love first. Her conceptualization of Historically Responsive Literacy, grounded in history and designed to “restore excellence in education” (Muhammad 2020), while presenting concrete exercises for teachers, are all based around this important philosophy. One must teach with love to effectively recognize the genius and ensure the success of their students. This concept is an idea that I think that many would agree with, and yet this is not what we tend to see in many public schools.

I believe that, as it currently stands in the United States, school as an institution actively creates difficulties that hinder teachers from teaching first and foremost with love and joy. From what I can see in class observation and in articles that discuss education, many teachers miss the mark on this, and schools are of no help in correcting this. Instead, they serve as an active deterrent. From Zero Tolerance efforts that motivate teachers to police and crack down on students, to standardized tests that motivate teachers and schools to focus on test scores rather than their students’ needs directly (Rothstein 2004) to the “oppressive hydra” (Love 2020) of institutionalized racism that affects the relationship between the majority-White teachers and the majority-Black and Brown students, school actively works against the thriving of Black and Brown students.

Nonetheless, teachers must persist if they want to genuinely help their students, and I believe that a foundational quality that teachers must have for this is the ability to trust. Teachers must trust their students' own sense of themselves. When students can trust teachers, powerful work can occur, but in order for this to happen it is crucial that the teachers trust their students first. If teachers enter the classroom with the assumption that students do not and will not care about course material, then students will never be engaged. Instead, they must trust that students, like all, are innately curious people, and will be engaged when they feel that material matters. If teachers enter the classroom detached and guarded, then they will not be able to form meaningful relationships with their students, nor will they understand their students' needs. If, on the other hand, teachers are open to being personal and fallible in front of their students, they can then begin to form a relationship with their students where students can then trust that teachers have their best interests at heart and will work to fit their needs in the classroom. Teaching is a collaborative process, and without trust in students, teachers will be neglecting their own participation in that process and harming the educational well-being of their students.

Additionally, teachers must believe their students' experiences and struggles, and, rather than look for the fault of a child. Look beyond to see why a certain event might have happened. Teachers must trust that their students know themselves and have something to say about themselves. With this trust, teachers and schools can move away from punitive mindsets and deficit thinking, and allow students to unlock their full capabilities. This is not to say that I believe that, as soon as trust is placed in students by a teacher, all of those students will automatically become what people generally think of as "good students." Rather, I am saying that with authentic trust, teachers can break down whatever their concept of a "good student" may be, and instead move forward with the understanding that all of their students are individual human beings with different motivations, behaviors, attention spans, without attaching their own values to any of these traits that might be found in their students.

Along with this comes my belief that teachers can counteract the negative impacts of the institution of school by actively reinforcing and supporting students' many self-identities. With the understanding that many public school systems police students' identities, undervalue Black and Brown populations, and look on with a deficit mindset, it is even more important than it already would be for teachers to reinforce their students' own self-identity. According to Muhammad, this can be done through assigning culturally-relevant texts, "who are you"

exercises and respecting the significance that a student's name or nickname might have to them. More important than these physical concrete steps is the spiritual practice of trusting and making students feel that the spaces in their classrooms belong to them. As educators, Muhammad believes, we have the responsibility to "learn about our students' future selves" (Muhammad 2020), to nurture and cultivate the identities that they bring into the classroom. This does not mean that we should cultivate what we think their identities should be. Rather, we must bolster students' own multifaceted self-identities in order to set them up for their own positive development and their own success. Public school may not do this for many of the students that attend, especially their students of color, and while structural changes such as the abolishment of police in schools and a de-emphasis on standardized testing can help change the landscape of schooling for the better, it is up to teachers to engage in the highly important work of trust, bolstering self-identity and above all teaching with love.

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Response to "Love, Trust and Self"

If I am remembering correctly, I believe that one piece of feedback I received on this essay was that "teaching first and foremost, with love and joy" was a vague concept. Looking over my current essay now, I can't help but agree, though I do agree with the essential point of what I think I was trying to say back then. Though I'm not sure I explained it very well back then, I would still agree that oftentimes instances of student sensemaking or actions are too easily deemed to be disruptive or harmful by a school system that might sooner punish a student for misbehavior rather than looking at what a student is doing from another angle. What might look like an outburst, a distraction or a student speaking out of turn to a teacher might be a student using their own differing cultural tools to make sense of a concept. I think what I was trying to get at with my essay here was that teaching with love means looking past one's own cultural biases in that moment in order to realize that a student is not trying to interrupt, distract or undermine, but is instead trying to learn. While I might use different terminology than "teaching

with love and joy” to describe the solution to this problem (I might instead suggest treating these moments as puzzling situations, and taking the time to move past personal discomfort. The work of Cindy Ballenger, as well as the conversations I had with Professor Katerine Bielaczyc and my classmates in Human Development and Learning have most directly reshaped this line of thinking, and for that I am grateful to all of them.