Culturally Contested Curriculum? African American Students and Classical Education

Mary E. Negley

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CULTURALLY CONTESTED CURRICULUM? AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS
AND CLASSICAL EDUCATION

by

MARY NEGLEY

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a series of speculative essays that explore the intersections of classical education, African American education, and culturally responsive/relevant/sustaining pedagogy. For centuries, classical education dominated the educational scene, and even today many people consider it to be a paragon of learning. However, it contains elitist and outdated ideas. By recognizing the miseducation of Blacks in the United States and exploring the educational journeys of four prominent African Americans: Marva Collins (1936-2015), W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), August Wilson (1945-2005), and Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950), I explore possibilities that classical education can be culturally empowering for African American students rather than contested to their cultural heritages, legacies, traditions, and histories. I illuminate ways to create culturally empowering pedagogy for classical education for African American students. Classical education should be used to liberate African American students rather than oppress them. We need to create a space for African American students to heal from their tragic loss and all forms of oppression they experience at home, in the community, and at school. We also need to honor African American students’ funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and the cultural roots of their learning styles (Hale-Benson, 1986). To develop culturally empowering pedagogy for the classical education for African American students, White teachers need to critically examine who they were and how they have become who they are as teachers, challenge their biases, recognize their cultural blindness, and defy internal and external racism and should work with other educational workers to create a culturally inspiring and liberating learning environment, where all African American students have equal opportunity to reach their highest potential (Walker, 1996).
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CLASSICAL EDUCATION

by

MARY NEGLEY

B.S., University of Georgia, 2007
B.A., University of Georgia, 2007
M. Ed., University of Georgia, 2009

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
CULTURALLY CONTESTED CURRICULUM? AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AND CLASSICAL EDUCATION

by

MARY NEGLEY

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Bettie and Cary Negley, for their unwavering encouragement and support.
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Several years ago, I helped host a group of educators and community members from Chicago. They were visiting our school with the purpose of starting their own classical charter school in Chicago. Out of all the schools in our classical charter network, they chose to visit us because our student demographics closely matched the demographics that they anticipated having. At the end of a full day of observations, the visitors met with some of us to share their reflections. One of them, an African American male, shared that he had started the trip with conflicting emotions. While he was eager to see our curriculum in action, he had also been concerned that it would be too Euro-centric. Instead, he was impressed by the care and sensitivity he saw in action. He visited a fourth-grade class that was studying ancient Ghana, and he saw the teacher with thoughtfulness and attention leading the students to higher-order thinking skills. Throughout the day, he met students, who were eager to talk with him and share what they were learning. The classical curriculum was more alive and more liberating than he had imagined.

While the visitor was sharing his thoughts, I thought back to my first year of teaching, which was the year that the school opened. I had a sixth-grade homeroom and taught math, science, and ELA, while another teacher taught social studies. One day, I was monitoring my students during recess, and I saw one of them holding the other’s hands behind his back and pushing him forward, like the first student was arresting the second student and taking him to the police car. I called over, “What are y’all doing?” The first one called back, “I’m arresting Socrates for corrupting the youth!” They had just learned about that in social studies. To my own ignorance, I did not know that Socrates had been arrested for corrupting the youth. I was also impressed that what they had learned in the classroom was being played out during recess.

In *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s Broken Education System—And How to Fix It*, Natalie Wexler (2019) writes about a similar observation that some of the teachers made when their school switched over to the content-focused curriculum, Core Knowledge. In second grade, students were learning about Greek gods and goddesses, and during recess they
started forming themselves into groups of Greek gods and goddesses. A teacher overheard her students telling one of their peers, “You can’t be our Athena, but they need an Athena, but if you want to be our Artemis then we’re good to go, because we don’t have one yet” (Wexler, 2019, p. 207; emphasis in original). Wexler also shares that on a large map of the United States on the playground, the students would act out the tall tales that they were learning. Even the younger students would bring what they were learning in the classroom out on the playground. Of their own initiative, the kindergarteners would search for rocks during recess because they were studying that topic in class. One of the teachers remarked that in her entire teaching career, she had never witnessed “academic content feed over into recess” (Wexler, 2019, p. 207; emphasis in original).

While reflecting on these instances of students acting out what they were learning in the classroom, I wanted to compare my own observations with those of my peers. After my school moved away from teaching Core Knowledge, I observed a shift in how the students played during recess. The students transitioned from making up games based what they were learning in the classroom to typical recess activities, such as tag, football, and cheerleading. I spoke with some of my colleagues, who had taught at the school since the beginning with me, and they said that they had noticed the same shift in the students’ self-initiated games during recess. The subject matter that they learned in the classroom no longer inspired what the students did on the playground. I found only one contradiction to this theory. Kindergarteners still studied rocks, and, during that unit, they still spent recess searching for rocks. One day I even noticed a kindergartener pick up a rock on his way to the bus at the end of the day. I told him to leave it at school. I did not want him to take the rock with him on the bus because I thought that he might throw the rock at another student on the bus or out of the bus window. Later I told his teacher that I had seen him pick up a rock, and she said that he had probably done it because they were studying rocks in their class and her students enjoyed bringing her cool rocks that they had found. Out of all the free play that I have witnessed since my school’s shift away from a classical
Before working at my current school, I had never thought much about classical education. During the interview process, the principal asked me to prepare a short essay about classical education for the face-to-face interview. Knowing next to nothing about classical education, I researched it and wrote a short essay. During our two-week training before the district’s pre-planning began, the whole faculty and staff learned about classical education and what it would look like at our school. Over the years, my role at the school transitioned to be in gifted education and math, and I had less to do with classical education, which became the domain of the history, English, and Latin teachers. As an outsider, I observed students as they delved into classical education and reflected on my own educational journey.

My own K-12 education began in the fall of 1989 in a Metro Atlanta K-5 preschool class. Around the middle of my kindergarten year, we moved to Savannah, and I attended a public Chatham county school. Midway through my third-grade year, we moved to New Jersey, and I attended a middle-class suburban/rural public school there. The summer before fifth grade, we moved to Gwinnett county, which is near Atlanta, and I attended suburban public schools there through tenth grade. The summer before my eleventh-grade year, my family moved back to Savannah, and I attended a small, private liberal arts high school.

Throughout my education, I dabbled in the humanities but did not delve too deeply into classical education. During sixth grade, I relished our Greek mythology unit. Back in fourth grade, I had gotten the classic *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* (1992), and I loved reading it on my own. Then in sixth grade I was ecstatic to learn about Greek mythology with my peers. Starting in seventh grade, I took German and continued it throughout high school and college. I never studied Latin or Greek because my foreign language slot was already filled with German. In ninth grade, I studied a translation of the Odyssey in English. Each year throughout high school, we studied a different Shakespearean play. I remember just learning a little bit about
ancient history in my middle school social studies classes. In my ninth-grade world history class, we focused on ancient history for about a month before we covered the rest of world history. I do not remember ever learning about ancient Ghana, like students do in the fourth grade Core Knowledge curriculum. At my private high school in Savannah, I took various core classes and the teachers mainly lectured while the students took notes and wrote papers. In my English courses, we read a variety of books and poetry from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. My English teacher emphasized analyzing and discussing what we had read.

Once I got to college, I studied German and mathematics. Once I fulfilled my small humanities requirement, I did not take another humanities class other than my German courses. During my junior year of college, I studied in Germany. In Germany, most of what we read was contemporary, but I remember reading a few fairy tales in one of my classes. Looking back at my own education, I would say that I dabbled in the liberal arts and classical studies, but I do not have a strong foundation in those areas.

Why Do I Want to Do This Study?

When I started planning my dissertation, I knew that I wanted to study some topic that would help me teach my current students better. I also knew that by working in a classical school with a predominately African American population, I was in a unique position to learn about a topic that had not been studied extensively in the past. Could a classical education benefit African Americans? Some African Americans had argued that classical education helped them in the past, however, did that hypothesis hold true in the modern educational system?

I thought about the educators and community members, who had founded my school. The head board member is an older, African American male, and during my interview, he shared with me his motivation for starting this charter school with a classical education focus. He described breaking up a fight between two teenage African American boys and asking them why they had started fighting. They could not articulate to him why they had fought. I could see that this experience had shaken the board member. He said that he wanted to start a school, where children
like those boys could receive a quality education. They could learn to communicate better and solve disagreements without physically fighting. He believed that if they had been able to articulate their thoughts better, they would not have fought.

Like that board member, I want to see if classical education could be a liberating education for African American students. Critics would say that classical education is inappropriate for African Americans. In *Literacies of Power: What Americans are not Allowed to Know*, Donaldo Macedo (1994) writes:

> This traditional elitist approach to education is inherently alienating in nature. On the one hand, it ignores the life experience, history, culture, and language practices of students. On the other, it overemphasizes the mastery and understanding of classical literature and the use of great books as the only vehicle that enables one to search for the “Good and True.” (p. 63)

Macedo argues that classical education does not work for marginalized students because it disregards their backgrounds and isolates them from the larger society. It teaches students that classical literature is the only way to find what is “good” in life. Macedo believes that classical education fails students. On the other hand, as Natalie Wexler (2019) writes in *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s Broken Education System—And How to Fix It*, “It turns out that children not only can handle learning about things that are remote from their own experience, they often love it” (p. 28). Yes, students’ backgrounds and experiences should not be ignored by the teacher. However, students relish learning about topics that are outside of their psyche. A skillful teacher can blend the two disparate worlds together, and he/she can do so in a way that affirms the students and their cultures.

Critics of classical education for African American students would question its suitability because it often relies on students learning about the classics of ancient Greece and Rome. However, those classics are not the only classics. A classical education can also explore the classics of Africa, and African American students could make connections to those classics. By
exploring the intersections of classical education, African American education, and culturally empowering pedagogy, I can question whether classical education can be a liberating form of education for African Americans. I will answer the questions: What is classical education? How can classical education be modified to be liberating for African Americans? What would that freeing education look like?
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Education, then, is the safest and richest investment possible to man. It pays the largest dividends and gives the grandest possible product to the world—a man.

Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice from the South

What is the State of Classical Education in the United States?

In the 2011 play, “One Man, Two Guvnors”, which is set in early 1960s Brighton, England, one of the characters, an erudite, successful lawyer, spouts off Latin phrases at every opportunity. These Latin phrases confound everyone in his company other than his son, who was probably educated similarly to his father. I use this example to illustrate how this divide between the classically trained minority and the progressively educated majority not only existed in 1960s Brighton, England but also exists in the United States today.

To understand the current state of classical education, we need to look to the past first. A classical education used to be the common education for students. In the article, “Classical Education in America”, Daniel Walker Howe (2011) writes, “Ever since the Middle Ages, a classical education [has] represented a synthesis of reason and virtue” (p. 31). Through a classical education, students learned both how to think and how to live morally. This ubiquity of classical education lasted until the end of the 19th century. Since most educated people learned through this method, they shared a similar knowledge base with other educated people. Howe (2011) writes, “From the Middle Ages until the late 19th century, knowledge of the classics thus provided educated people the world over with a common frame of reference” (p. 32). During that time period, people, who had read the classics, could reference them with each other. They had a common reference point.

After the 19th century, many public schools transitioned from a classical to a progressive form of education. Howe (2011) writes, “Parochial and private schools maintained the classical standards longer than most public ones, but much of the incentive for Catholic schools to do so
was removed in the 1960s, when the Mass ceased to be celebrated in Latin” (p. 36). When Mass was no longer celebrated in Latin, it made little sense for Catholic students to learn that language, so Catholic schools became less classical.

However, towards the end of the 20th century, the United States experienced a small renaissance in classical education. In the article, “Back to Basics: The Resurgence of Classical Education,” John J. Miller (2015) describes the reemergence of classical education in the United States as beginning with small private Christian schools and homeschooled students and then spreading to other types of schools. Miller (2015) writes, “Although private Christian schools sparked the revival of classical academies, the biggest area for growth lies in public schools” (p. 44). Today classical education proponents see public schools as open markets for classical learning. My school is an example of a public classical school and is part of a network of other public classical schools throughout the United States.

Other writers speak about the forms that modern classical schools take. In Ian Lindquist’s (2019) article, “Classical Schools in Modern America,” Lindquist separates the modern classical education movement into three wings: The Protestant Christian classical private schools, the Catholic classical private schools, and the secular, democratic classical schools, which are normally public charter schools. The three different types of schools may have different funding sources and varied visions for their students, but they all converge on the idea that classical education is still relevant. Miller (2015) writes, “Today’s classical educators stress that their goal is not merely to dust off an antiquated style of education, but to find new ways to apply tried-and-true approaches that have fallen so far out of fashion that they’ve all but disappeared from mainstream education” (p. 44). Classical educators do not see classical education as irrelevant, but they believe that it is necessary for modern students. While there has been a resurgence in classical schools in the United States, many educators and university leaders still believe that classics programs are not vital. Speaking about colleges, Howe (2011) writes, “Classics programs are small and underfunded, and when education budgets are squeezed, such programs are often
among the first to go” (p. 31). Classical programs are not as popular as they were in the past, however, they are not dead yet either.

What is the State of Classical Education in Savannah, Georgia?

Just like how some classical schools exist in the United States, in Savannah, Georgia, there are a few schools providing a classical education. Two of the most rigorous classical schools are both private, Christian schools. Many of the other private schools follow some classical methods. However, my school was the only Savannah public school that also professed to be a classical school.

In my public school district, many of the schools follow curricula that adhere to the Georgia Standards of Excellence. Some of the schools are specialty schools with an arts or STEM focus. Others are technical schools with a focus on preparing students for careers. A few of the high schools offer many dual enrollment opportunities, where students can take college courses while in high school. When my school opened in the fall of 2013, we were established as a classical charter school, where students would be able to learn Latin and follow the Core Knowledge curriculum, which is a systematic, content-rich sequence of study for K-8th grade students. We were the only true classical public school in the district at that time even though another school had used Core Knowledge in the past.

As a charter school, my school must demonstrate that it is more successful for students than the district schools. The main way that the district and the state determine the strength of our school is through the Georgia Milestones testing results. The topics that students learn each year in Core Knowledge do not often align with the Georgia Standards of Excellence that they are tested on at the end of the year. We thought that students could overcome this difficulty because the Core Knowledge curriculum would give them such a strong foundation in reading and writing that our students would be able to do well on the Georgia Milestones. We also believed that the teachers would have extra time in the lessons to fill in the gaps for the Georgia Milestones. Our school is a high-poverty school, and our reading and math levels reflect that. Teachers had to
spend extra time on reading and math basics, and they were not able to teach any extra Georgia Standards of Excellence that were not covered by Core Knowledge. Several years ago, my school was given one last opportunity to show its effectiveness, and we had to align our curriculum to the Georgia Standards of Excellence. We no longer teach using Core Knowledge. Instead, we follow a curriculum that is solely based on preparing students for the Georgia Milestones. Many of our teachers, who used to teach the classical curriculum, miss the conversations that their students would have in their classical lessons. Until we no longer rely on Georgia Milestones results to prove the strength of our school or we figure out a way to teach the Georgia Standards of Excellence through a classical curriculum, I do not see my school returning to a classical educational model. Since my public school has turned away from classical education, private schools and homeschooling families are the only purveyors of classical education in Savannah now.

Main Challenges for My Students

My students come from a variety of backgrounds. Some live in two parent households, but most live with a single parent or divide their time between their parents’ households. Some of my students’ parents are more affluent, but most of my students qualify for free or reduced lunch based on their family income. Most of my students are African American and around five percent of the student body is White, Asian, or Latinx. About twenty percent of my students have parents, who are in the military. I think of my school as being a mixture of a specialty school and a neighborhood school. It is like a specialty school because we have students from across Chatham county and students must get chosen in a lottery to get into our school. However, it is also like a neighborhood school because it is a Title-I school, like many of the neighborhood schools in our school district. Many of the neighborhood schools are high poverty because a lot of the more affluent students go to a private, specialty school or charter school instead of their neighborhood school. Being a small charter school with a rigorous, academic model, we can attract a diverse
population of students. Still, our students experience many of the challenges that the typical Savannah public school student experiences.

One of the main challenges that our students experience is poverty. For many of our students, breakfast at school is the first meal that they will have in a day, and for some, lunch is the last meal they get. About 15 percent of our students are backpack buddies, where they get a backpack of donated food every Friday to take home to their families. I have a planning period when many of them pick up their backpacks and I see them eagerly walk by my room on their way to the office to get their food and then excitedly walk back to their class with a heavy pack of food to sustain their families through the weekend. They get a special meal to take home for Thanksgiving, and their parents can come to school to pick up donated presents for the holidays. Sometimes I will notice a student being disruptive or cranky, but then when I talk with the child, I will realize that he did not have anything to eat yet that day, so hunger is making him act out.

Our students also experience academic challenges. Many of them are reading below grade level or are below their grade level in math. They may have entered kindergarten behind their peers in pre-kindergarten skills and each year they find it harder to catch up. Many of their parents are working multiple jobs and are unable to read with them, practice flashcards or check over their homework at night. Some of our students are taking care of their younger siblings while their parent is at work. Because they feel behind or stressed, school may be a challenging, alienating place for them.

Another challenge that our students experience are social challenges. Our school is very small with up to 50 students per grade split into two homerooms. Many of our students have been with the same students for the last eight years. They find it hard to get along with each other socially. Jealousy, disagreements, arguments, and dramas arise. A student might have a disagreement with another student at school, and she follows the advice that she is given at home and stands up for herself by fighting the other girl. Then she gets in trouble at school because she has broken one of the school rules. Students find it hard to get along with each other sometimes.
With all these challenges facing our students, it is not surprising that school can stress students out. Our students deal with so many stressors while trying to learn. As educators, we not only need to teach our grade-level standards to students, but we also need to help them deal with life.

Why a Theoretical Dissertation?

When I first started planning my dissertation, I wanted to study classical education from the perspective of my students. Most of the students at my school identify as African American and I decided that they, as a group, would have unique perspectives. As a middle-class, White, female teacher, I have a certain perspective of classical education. I believe that many people and important voices are left out of that curriculum, but I can still see myself in the content. My students, on the other hand, cannot. Does that difficulty in identifying with the people they are learning about hurt African American students? I also wanted to study if the classical curriculum that my students were learning was effective for them. If my students connected with it, saw any value in it, noticed their teachers changing the curriculum for them or saw ways for it to be changed to be more effective for them.

As I got closer to starting my research for my dissertation, my school had moved away from a classical education model, and I realized that if I interviewed my students, they would have to think back to previous school years. I worried that they would not be able think back that far or even be able to answer my questions well. My advisor suggested that instead of doing a qualitative dissertation, I do a theoretical dissertation, meaning that I would delve even deeper into the topics of classical education, Black education, urban schooling and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

I would study classical education because that model of education fascinated me. Before working at my school, I did not know much about classical education. Even with my few years of experience teaching in a classical school, I felt like I still had much to learn about the field of classical education. I also wanted to study Black education since most of my students are Black. I
wanted to educate myself on the best teaching methods for Black students. Are there educational strategies that are better for African American students, and if so, what are they? What do African American scholars have to say about Black education? How can I learn about this field in order to educate my students better? In addition to studying Black education, I wanted to study urban education. I teach in an urban school and my urban students live and study in a different environment than rural students do. What could the field of urban education teach me about connecting with my students? Lastly, I wanted to examine culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), which is a new form of education. Through CSP, students work with educators to restore injustices in their communities. I knew that CSP would be a discerning lens through which to view the rest of my research.

Why is This Study Important?

This study is important because the education of my students is important. Through my research, I want to learn how to teach my students better and to become a voice of change in my school and schools like mine. We know that there is an achievement or opportunity gap between White and Black students. Table 1 and table 2 show the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress proficiency level percentiles nationally and in Georgia. At each score level, Whites outperform Blacks (At or above basic, at or above proficient, and at advanced). The only column, in which Black students have a higher percentage than White students, is the below basic percentages, meaning that more Black students scored below basic than White Students. We know that these tests are culturally biased and are not the best determinant of what students know, but it is disconcerting when the percentages are so different. In some cases, the difference of White students versus Black students performing at a proficient level is as high as 33 percent.
<table>
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<td>Reading</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Below Basic 53, At or Above Basic 47, At or Above Proficient 13, At Advanced 2</td>
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Note. Below basic and at advanced data were not available.

As an educator, I want to do whatever I can to close the achievement gap and help African American students be successful in school and prepared for life through their education.

Proponents of classical education rave about its ability to fill in knowledge gaps that students may
have and allow them to be successful in the larger American society. Critics of classical education censure its Eurocentric views and limiting idea of knowledge. Students are not appreciated for the knowledge they bring with them to school. Watkins (2001) writes, “Education can be used both to oppress and liberate” (p. 1). Usually, I think about education’s ability to liberate and am blind to the ways that my own students are oppressed through their education. As I delve deeply into the topics of urban schooling, Black education, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, I learn more about an education that is liberative not oppressive.

Major Influences

The Miseducation of Blacks in the U. S. South

Several questions guided my inquiry into the field of African American education. The first was, “What are the roots of African American education in the United States?” Reading James D. Anderson’s (1988) seminal work, The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935, provided me with a foundation on which to start my research. The chapters on industrial education were especially illuminating because they enabled me to understand the conflict between that form of education and the classical educational model for African Americans better. Another scholar, who explained the pull of industrial education to Blacks seeking advancement was William H. Watkins, who, in his book, The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865-1954, summarized his research with the notion that “education can be used both to oppress and to liberate” (Watkins, 2001, p. 1). Often, we think about the way education liberates, but I need to be cognizant of the ways it oppresses. W. E. B. Du Bois was another scholar, who provided insight on the beginnings of standardized Black education for me. He quarreled famously with Booker T. Washington, who advocated for industrial education being the only way for Blacks to succeed in the New South, whereas Du Bois believed that some Blacks needed a classical, liberal education in order to lead Black people into success. In The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois wrote that the “Talented Tenth” of Black Americans should be given a more traditional, classical education, which would equip them to lead the rest of their race to equality with Whites. Du Bois (1903/2017) believed, “True training meant neither that all should be college men nor all artisans” (p. 34). Through Du Bois, I learned that education need not be a “one-size-fits-all” solution.

Another pivotal question that guided my inquiry was “What does an effective education for African Americans look like?” One of the scholars who answered that question for me was Christopher Emdin. Through Urban Science Education for the Hip-Hop Generation: Essential Tools for the Urban Science Educator and Researcher (2010), I reimagined my own teaching transformed through hip-hop education. By the teacher utilizing aspects of hip hop, such as
cyphering and collaboration, in the classroom, urban students can learn better and more confidently (Emdin, 2010). Likewise, through *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood . . . and the Rest of Y’all too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*, I saw my teaching using the lens of reality pedagogy. Through reality pedagogy, teachers learn to value the realities their students bring with them to the classroom, and they discover how to “teach directly to the students” (Emdin, 2016, p. 40; emphasis in original).

Several other educators inspired me with their success teaching African American students. One of the landmark books I encountered was Marva Collins’s 1990 book, *Marva Collins’ Way*, which Collins co-authored with Civia Tamarkin. Collins, an educator who worked with students in Chicago, believed that the classics and liberal arts contained valuable lessons and inspiration for her students. Her school gained much publicity because “it had become a common assumption that the liberal arts curriculum was beyond the capacity of black children” (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982/1990, p. 161). People believed that students could only learn from stories that related to their own experiences. Instead, Collins found that her students eagerly devoured any classical material that she offered to them. She believed, “Any child could learn if a teacher cared enough to teach” (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982/1990, p. 162). Collins inspired teachers to persevere in teaching those “hard-to-reach” students. She also found that her students relished learning the classics when Collins taught them in an engaging way. Collins taught successfully using a classical education.

Another educator, who inspired me was bell hooks. She believed that her teaching promoted freedom. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, she believed that the educators, who could promote freedom through their teaching, were the ones “who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (hooks, 1994, p. 13). Rather than just feeding knowledge to students, teachers needed to
help students grow their minds and their spirits. Effective educators seek to help their students grow in all areas.

The third scholar, who inspired me, was Asa G. Hilliard, III. He studied the successful education of African American students. In the 2003 book, *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*, which Hilliard co-authored with Theresa Perry and Claude Steele, Hilliard wrote about a teacher, who has great success teaching African American students. Hilliard shared that none of her techniques were innovative, but:

> the uniqueness [was] in the quality of the implementation of good instructional practices.

Respecting prior knowledge, valuing and creating human bonds, studying for deep knowledge, respecting students, respecting parents, respecting communities are all accepted by professionals, at a verbal level. (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 154)

Many teachers already know effective educational strategies, and they might claim to use them, but their actual practice proves otherwise. Teachers might say that they respect their students’ parents and communities, but do their actions demonstrate respect? How do educators show that they respect the knowledge that students bring with them to the classroom? How do they establish rapport with students? By consistently implementing honoring and respectful instructional practices, educators may be more successful with students.

Another scholar, who inspired me, was Carter G. Woodson. He sought to uplift his own people. In his masterful work, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, which was originally published in 1933, he examined how Blacks had been educated to think poorly of themselves, and he called for them to uplift each other. To do so, he said that they needed “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, 2018, p. 63). Woodson believed that Whites would not lift African Americans. Instead, they would need to elevate each other. Woodson believed that one way African Americans could gain respect in themselves was by studying the brilliance of their people.
Another encouraging scholar I enjoyed reading was Lisa Delpit. I first encountered her work in one of my doctoral classes, and since that first introduction, I have sought out more of her writing. Delpit’s passion for educating all children speaks to me. In her book, *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, she writes, “If we are to successfully educate all of our children, we must work to remove the blinders built of stereotypes, monocultural instructional methodologies, ignorance, social distance, biased research, and racism” (Delpit, 2006, p. 182). By using the phrase, “all of our children,” Delpit demonstrates that all our students deserve equitable respect and education. Even if a student looks different from us or comes from a different background, he/she is still one of our children. We need to uncover any bias, racism, and ignorance in our thinking and get rid of it, so that we can educate our children better.

Since I am a White educator working with mainly African American students, I sought out scholarly work about White educators teaching Black children. Gary R. Howard is one such scholar I found. Howard is a White educator, who has transformed his own mindset to teach multicultural students better and encourages other White educators to examine themselves. In his book, *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, Howard (2016) advises White educators to “decode and dismantle the dynamics of dominance” (p. 87). Many White educators do not even realize that they hold on to dominant forms of thinking. However, they need to admit that they think that their way of thinking is superior to their students’ way of thinking and, it does not surpass the way of their students. They also need to “shift the flow of power away from oppression and toward greater inclusion and justice” (Howard, 2016, p. 87). Instead of oppressing their students by demanding that they assimilate to a mainstream culture, White educators need to include their students’ cultures and help them to obtain justice.

Because my students attend an urban school, I studied urban education also. Many students at urban schools fail. Charles M. Payne studied urban schools to see why reform efforts failed. In the book, *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban*
Schools, Payne writes that the reason why urban schools struggle is more multi-faceted than just poverty or teacher apathy. He also discovered that students in urban schools perform better when teachers hold them to high standards. Without high expectations, students do not achieve as well. Additionally, teachers need to build rapport with students. There are many actions an educator could take to form a respectful, encouraging relationship with students. Obviously, instruction plays a big part in how well students learn, but Payne (2010) writes, “For some children, the mantra needs to be instruction and connection” (p. 116). Students in urban schools need high-quality instruction and connection with the adults in schools. Likewise, in her book, Urban Youth and School Pushout: Gateways, Get-Aways and the GED, Eve Tuck (2012) studied why students dropped out of high school and discovered “relationships between youth and school personnel matter. Just one caring relationship can be a brace against the alienation and disrespect youth experience in schools” (p. 159; emphasis in original). Educators, who connect with students can help them to stay in school and excel. Not only could curriculum play a role in the success of students, but connection with their teachers also plays a huge part in whether students thrive.

Through researching urban education, I encountered Jean Anyon and Jonathon Kozol. Both scholars spent years researching urban schools and their students. Jean Anyon studied both schools that served affluent neighborhoods and other schools that were in working-class communities, and, in her book, Theory and Educational Research: Toward Critical Social Explanation, she wrote that “the inequalities between these schools are symptoms of an underlying pathology” (Anyon, 2009, p. 21). Anyon used the word, “pathology,” to invoke the idea of a disease creating differences in the resources of affluent and non-affluent schools. Likewise, Jonathon Kozol studied the funding differences among various schools, and, in his book, Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools, Kozol (1991) wrote “we want the game to be unfair and we have made it so; and it will likely so remain” (p. 270). Schools receive funding passed on the property taxes that their communities pay, so schools in more affluent communities receive more funding while schools in needier areas, which would need more
resources, receive less funding. This disparity in funding is unfair and students, who attend less-funded schools, suffer. Anyon, through her research, found a way to right this disparity. To end the inequities in urban education, Anyon (2009) called for “a set of policies and activities that treat the system, as well as the symptoms” (p. 21). Often, we focus on trying to fix the symptoms that we see when we need to fix the “underlying pathology.” Anyon instead says that we need to fix the way that we fund schools. Through reading those authors, I looked at urban schools with a new perspective.

Classical Education and Progressive Education

Since my dissertation deals with students learning a classical education, I also studied classical education. As I learned more about classical education, I wanted to compare it with a different form of education, progressive education. By studying classical education and progressive education, I could understand the curriculum that my students were learning.

When I started researching classical education advocates, I came across R. W. Livingstone, who was a prominent British classical education scholar. In his book, *A Defence of Classical Education*, Livingstone argued that the classics were the best form of education that a student could have. According to Livingstone (1916/2019):

> Of course no one supposes that a study of thought and history is complete once we have mastered the classics. But the simplicity and lucidity with which they raise one after another the fundamental problems of life and thought, make them a better introduction to these than modern writers. (p. 180)

Livingstone saw the classics as being a wonderful introduction to history and philosophy. Instead of arguing that students should only study the classics, he believed that students should start with the classics and then move on to more modern works. The classics would provide the foundation, upon which modern authors would build.

Another scholar of the classical tradition was Alfred North Whitehead. He advocated for classical education, but he also believed that it should not be the only form of education offered to
students. In *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, he wrote “All education has been judged adequate or defective according to its approximation to this sole type” (Whitehead, 1929/1967, p. 46). He believed that classical education suited some students, but other forms of education suited others. Whitehead did not want for classical education to be left out of schools, but he also did not believe that schools should only teach classical education.

One of the few familiar names that I encountered when I first started studying classical education was E. D. Hirsch. I knew of him because he had developed Core Knowledge, which was the K-8th grade curriculum that my school used to use for reading, history, and science. However, prior to writing my dissertation, I had never read any of his books. In his book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, E. D. Hirsch advocated for the knowledge-based curriculum, which often describes classical education. He argued that in order to be literate, children needed to learn information in a systematic way. Hirsch believed that through a knowledge-based curriculum, students learned information in an orderly, logical way. Hirsch (1988) wrote, “Literacy, an essential aim of education in the modern world, is no autonomous, empty skill but depends upon literate culture” (p. xvii). He believed that before students began reading, they needed to hear stories that would build that literate culture that they needed in order to start reading well. Hirsch used the term, “cultural literacy” to describe the domain of knowledge that he thought a person should possess in order to be literate about the world. He believed that students should begin acquiring that knowledge from a young age. In the book, *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children*, Hirsch (2007) wrote, “To become a good comprehender, a child needs a great deal of knowledge” (p. 8). Students need background knowledge in order to understand what they are reading. He believed that through a knowledge-based curriculum, students could get that background knowledge that they needed to improve their reading level. Hirsch (2007) also argued, “A content-neutral, skills-oriented concept of education has the unintended effect of depressing reading scores and diminishing the shared content we need for communication and solidarity
within the nation as a whole” (p. 107). He believed that the skills-based reading curriculum did not help students learn to read and left out a lot of knowledge that students needed to thrive in society.

Another modern classical education scholar I read was Tracy Lee Simmons. In his book, *Climbing Parnassus: A New Apologia for Greek and Latin*, which described the history of classical education, he wrote, “The hard, precipitous path of classical education ideally led not to knowledge alone, but to the cultivation of mind and spirit” (Simmons, 2002/2016, p. 16). We think about classical education teaching students about certain stories and people, but Simmons believed that the classics also improved students’ minds and spirits. Simmons thought that students might find classical education difficult, but they would be stronger in every way after going through it.

As I researched classical education, I searched for criticisms of it. One of the arguments that critics of classical education make is that classical education is too rooted in White, Western European traditions. However, in *SBA: The Reawakening of the African Mind*, Asa G. Hilliard, III argued that classical education was instead rooted in African tradition. Hilliard (1997/1999) wrote, “The religious and educational systems of Africa, in the conquered form, became the foundation for Europe’s classical civilization” (p. 42). Europeans built their classical traditions from the systems they learned from the colonized Africa. Also, Hilliard (1997/1999) argued, “The concept of a liberal arts education is African” (p. 42). Instead of liberal arts education being European, Hilliard believed that the idea of it is African.

The scholar, Grant Lilford, also believed that aspects of classical education started outside of Western Europe and Greece. In his 2012 article, “The liberal arts in anglophone Africa,” Lilford (2012) writes that Arab scholars introduced the idea of the trivium, or the three classical stages of learning that students go through, to people in sub-Saharan Africa during the same time that they were reacquainting Europeans with it (p. 192). From Arab scholars, Africans learned about the trivium, which justifies the idea that classical education existed in Africa.
While researching classical education, I found that in many schools the last remaining remnants of classical education are the liberal arts and the humanities. Diane Ravitch (2013) advocates for the liberal arts in *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools*, and she writes, “If we mean to educate them, we must recognize that all children deserve a full liberal arts education” (p. 241). She believes that all students should have access to history, literature, art, music, science, and foreign languages.

While studying classical education, I wanted to compare it with more progressive forms of education, so I sought out critics of classical education and liberal arts. One such critic was Paulo Freire, who saw classical education as the banking form of education, which he decried. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/1996) wrote, “In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 53). Freire believed that students had valuable knowledge to bring to the classroom. Instead of seeing students as empty and needing teachers to fill them with knowledge, educators should realize that they have much to learn from their students. Teachers are not the only ones with knowledge in the classroom.

Another critic of classical education was Donaldo Macedo, who collaborated frequently with Paulo Freire. In *Literacies of Power: What Americans are Not Allowed to Know*, Macedo (1994) wrote, “The dominant curriculum is designed primarily to reproduce the inequality of social classes, while it mostly benefits the interest of an elite minority” (p. 118). Macedo saw the dominant curriculum as promoting the status quo. He would characterize classical education as being a dominant curriculum because in a classical curriculum the teacher is sharing knowledge that he/she deems important with the students, which is like the curricula that dominate the educational system. Macedo believed that this form of curriculum was designed to keep the working class from advancing. The elite would stay on stop, which is what they wanted.

Some critics believe that classical education teachers force students to memorize long lists of facts and believe a set of values that they give them. In *Empowering Education: Critical*
Teaching for Social Change, Ira Shor (1992), a proponent of empowering, participatory, progressive education, argued, “Empowered students make meaning and act from reflection, instead of memorizing facts and values handed to them” (p. 12). Shor believed that teachers should allow students time to make their own meaning and reflect from their learning rather than shoving facts and values at them. Shor (1992) wrote, “An empowering teacher does not talk knowledge at students but talks with them” (p. 85; emphasis in original). This idea of talking with students ties in with the importance of connecting with students. A teacher should not talk at students. Instead, a teacher should converse with students and listen to what they have to say. Empowering teachers establish rapport with their students and set up a culture, where the students are free to guide their learning.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Reflecting on how to teach African American students in a classical education setting led me to culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). CSP developed out of Gloria Ladson-Billings’s culturally relevant teaching and Geneva Gay’s culturally responsive teaching. After studying educators, who successfully taught African American students, Gloria Ladson-Billings developed culturally relevant teaching, which she used to describe the techniques that those educators implemented. In The Dream-Keeper: Successful Teachers of African American Children, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) wrote, “Specifically, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). Educators use the cultures that students bring to the classroom to teach them. Instead of telling students that they need to lose their own cultures to adapt to a mainstream culture, teachers empower students by connecting the curriculum to the students’ cultures.

Culturally relevant teaching is like culturally responsive teaching, which, in Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice, Geneva Gay (2000) defined as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically
diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 29). Culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to learn about their students’ cultures and connect them to what they are learning. Like culturally relevant pedagogy, it empowers students by making “academic success a non-negotiable mandate for all students and an accessible goal” (Gay, 2000, p. 34). All students learn that they can be successful in school and culturally responsive teaching encourages teachers to make sure that all students thrive in school. Culturally responsive teaching also “releases the intellect of students of color from the constricting manacles of mainstream canons of knowledge and ways of knowing” (Gay, 2000, p. 35). Like in culturally relevant teaching, students learn from a variety of sources, not just one. To sum up culturally responsive teaching, Gay (2000) wrote that it “validates, facilitates, liberates, and empowers ethnically diverse students by simultaneously cultivating their cultural integrity, individual abilities, and academic success” (p. 44). Culturally responsive teaching supports students, whom monocultural curricula marginalizes, because it honors their cultures and gifts and enables them to be successful in school.

Out of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching, H. Samy Alim and Django Paris developed culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). In Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World, Alim and Paris write about how they saw the great need for CSP because in traditional schools, the purpose was to “forward the largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Traditional curricula force students to assimilate to a mainstream culture and they must leave their cultures outside the classroom. Instead, “CSP seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). CSP embraces students’ differences and utilizes them to improve schooling and society. The curriculum is “additive rather than subtractive” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Instead of operating out of a deficit mindset and
urging students to “fix” what they are missing, teachers view the cultures that students bring to the classroom as strengths, which can be added to the curriculum to enhance it. CSP differs from culturally relevant teaching and culturally responsive teaching by “opening up spaces for students themselves to critique the ways that they might be—intentionally or not—reproducing discourses that marginalize members of our communities” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 11). Students play a vital role in CSP, by examining their own actions and working to end injustice. In the chapter, “Language and Culture as Sustenance” from Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World, edited by Alim and Paris, Mary Bucholz, Dolores Inés Casillas, and Jin Sook Lee, write that CSP draws in educators, “who seek social justice for their students of color, whose sense of self is constantly under attack from schooling practices and policies that racialize and thereby devalue, distort, and erase their language, culture, and identity” (Bucholz, Casillas, & Lee, 2017, p. 43). CSP can be a way to validate students’ cultures, increase academic success, and encourage student activism. Through CSP, I can enable my African American students to find success, respect, and confidence in their schooling.

Why Speculative Essay?

My dissertation will take the form of a speculative essay because I am contemplating about current topics in education. I am speculating on how education could be. I am imagining the “what ifs” in education. To learn more about speculative essays, I drew on the work of William H. Schubert. In “Philosophical Inquiry: The Speculative Essay,” Schubert (1991) wrote, “The best essays on curriculum both illuminate and contribute to a fullness of vision and imagination that enables one to lead a better life” (p. 73). Through this essay, I hope to become a better teacher and enable my students to lead better lives. I will think imaginatively because I need to imagine how classical education and culturally sustaining pedagogy might go together. To my knowledge, they have not been combined before. By thinking speculatively, I can envision a better education for my students, and I can create a more liberating education for my students and aid them as they pursue freedom through their own educations. According to Schubert
“the essay is an inside look at curriculum; it is a record of the author speculating or theorizing” (p. 65). I theorize what this new form of education could be like based on multiple theories and perspectives. I study various curricula and the larger idea of curriculum in order to imagine curriculum differently. According to Schubert (1991), “Metaphorically, [the speculative essay] is a kind of meta-analysis or research synthesis that uses the informed and insightful scholar (rather than a set of statistical rules) as the instrument for synthesis and illumination” (p. 64). I am a new scholar, bringing with me a few years of experience in the classroom and building on the work of educators and thinkers with decades of experience. However, with their help and building from their ideas, I can bring a new perspective. The speculative essay is my research. I can become a better equipped teacher for my students, educating them to liberation not oppression.

Exemplary Speculative Essays

To learn how to write a speculative essay, I needed to study speculative essays. Throughout this doctoral program, I have encountered many examples of exemplary speculative essays. Some of my favorites include: Mumia Abu-Jamal and Marc Lamont Hill’s *The Classroom and the Cell: Conversations on Black Life in America*, bell hooks’s *Teaching to Transgress*, Bettina L. Love’s *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, and Martha C. Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit*.

I had read other work by Marc Lamont Hill before I came across Mumia Abu-Jamal and Marc Lamont Hill’s book, *The Classroom and the Cell: Conversations on Black Life in America*. In this book, Abu-Jamal and Hill write letters back and forth. The former is in prison and the latter works as a university professor. Their letters cover a variety of topics, including politics, education, and pop culture. In their conversation about education, they speculate about how to improve education for Black children. Abu-Jamal and Hill (2012) write, “Perhaps it’s time for the old Freedom Schools to re-emerge, perhaps sponsored by a collaboration of prominent rappers. Perhaps every social- or activist-type group should be charged with doing it for, say, 500 or 5,000..."
kids in their office’s immediate vicinity” (pp. 115-116). They are imagining what an effective educational setting could look like based on their own experiences, what they have read, and what happened historically. Instead of having traditional schools since that system has failed so many Black students, they start with a blank canvas and propose that activist groups start their own schools in their own communities. This revisioning of Black, urban education stands out to me because I also want to reimagine Black education. However, as I reimagine Black education, I must remember that I am an outsider to their culture, and I cannot let my subconscious notions of privilege trick me into believing that I know what is best for them.

One of my favorite books that I read during my doctoral program was bell hooks’s, *Teaching to Transgress* because I enjoyed how she tied in her own experiences with her scholarly insights. During one chapter, Gloria Watkins, her actual self, engages in an imaginative dialogue with bell hooks, her writing voice. This dialogue is an example of a speculative essay because hooks can theorize on a topic through this imaginary dialogue. In a later chapter, hooks shares a dialogue that she has with a White, male colleague to show how fruitful discussions can happen across gender and racial lines. As a White teacher of Black students, my students and I cross racial lines in every interaction. Throughout the book, hooks imagines how teaching can be different and freeing. She writes, “The academy is not a paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (hooks, 1994, p. 207). With her words, hooks invites the reader to imagine a more liberating education. No, the classroom is not perfect, but out of that flawed place, students can encounter freedom. I can use the words of bell hooks to spark ideas of a more freeing education for my own students.

I first encountered Bettina L. Love through her articles. When I saw that she had published her book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, I knew that I needed to read it. She begins the book with “we who are dark want to matter and live, not just to survive but to thrive. Matter not for recognition or
acknowledgement but to create new systems and structures for educational, political, economic, and community freedom” (Love, 2019, p. 1). She stresses the importance of Black people mattering. Because they matter, they can create better systems of education that will allow them to thrive in society. Throughout the book, Love writes about injustices in Blacks’ lives, educational inequities for dark children, and her own life and struggles. She describes abolitionist teaching and imagines how classrooms would improve if educators would use that form of pedagogy. For abolitionist teaching to happen, teachers and parents need to work together to right injustices in their schools and communities. Love (2019) writes, “As educators, we need to think of accountability beyond testing and academic achievement, and in terms of human suffering” (p. 122). Earlier in the chapter, I highlighted disparities in test scores between Whites and Blacks. Love inspires me to think beyond grades and scores and instead to get to know my students as humans and investigate for suffering. As a teacher, I can examine my own teaching to see if I am perpetuating policies that invoke human suffering or if I am working towards a liberating education.

My final example of an exemplary speculative essay that I would like to share is Martha C. Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. In the first chapter, Nussbaum sets up the book, by saying, “This book is about what we should be striving for. Until we are clear about this, it is difficult to figure out how to get it to those who need it” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 11). Throughout the book, Nussbaum describes the kind of humanities-filled education that a democracy needs and why a democracy needs it. She argues that every student at every grade level, including the university, needs access to the humanities. She also contends that a democracy needs humanities-educated students. She invites the reader to imagine that kind of education. As I write my own speculative essay, I need to envision that humanities-filled education for my students.
Outlines of Chapters

This dissertation consists of a preface, six chapters, and an afterthought. I wrote each chapter to be able to stand alone and tie in with the other chapters. Throughout the entire dissertation, I examine classical education and Black education and how they both relate to culturally sustaining pedagogy.

In the preface, I share a few stories relating to the typical classical education of my students. I also examine my own experiences as a student and a teacher. I end the preface by explaining why I want to do this study.

In Chapter 1, I set up the dissertation by reflecting on the state of classical education in the United States and in Savannah, Georgia. I describe my school and talk about the challenges that my students face. I explain why I wrote a theoretical dissertation rather than pursing a qualitative study. I also discuss my influences and how they guided me in this intellectual conversation. Then, I draw upon the work of William Schubert and reflect on speculative essay as a form of research and give examples of speculative essays that inspired me.

In Chapter 2, I analyze classical education and discuss how it differs from the liberal arts and humanities. I discuss the benefits of classical curriculum. Finally, I examine progressive education and share the critiques that progressive educators have made about classical education.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the education of African American students starting with its origins during slavery and briefly discussing the various forms the education has taken over the years. I also look at urban schools and discuss the various challenges and opportunities present in them. I ask, “What does effective education for Black students look like?” I end the chapter by examining different facets of African American education. I look at the importance of high expectations. I discuss combining African American culture with the school curriculum. I examine the different needs of Black boys and girls. I talk about the specific considerations of White teachers working with Black students. Lastly, I discuss the ideas of social justice and love in African American education.
In Chapter 4, I examine the educations of Marva Collins, a dedicated African American educator, W. E. B. Du Bois, a prominent African American scholar and sociologist, August Wilson, a renowned and talented African American playwright, and Carter G. Woodson, a distinguished historian. I chose these four African Americans to profile for various reasons. I chose Marva Collins because of her inspiration to me as a teacher. She believed that her students could learn. Throughout the years, her students proved her right by rising to meet her high expectations. I also profiled W. E. B. Du Bois because of the challenges he faced getting an education and how he believed that African Americans were capable of academic excellence. Also, I decided to study August Wilson because of his own self-taught educational journey and how, as a playwright, he chronicled the experiences of African American people. Finally, I chose Carter G. Woodson because he believed that everyone should learn Black history and without him, we might not have even one month celebrating Black history in schools nationwide (Obviously, we should not confine Black history to just one month in the school year but imagine if we did not honor Black history at all). At the end of the chapter, I discuss the importance of the classical education in their educations. I also examine how their educational journeys relate to the facets of African American education that I discussed in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 5, I first discuss how teaching classical education to African American students represents a culturally contested pedagogy. I then examine how often we use a culturally irrelevant pedagogy to teach classical education topics to African American students, since the topics are outside of their culture. Finally, I propose a new pedagogy: Culturally empowering pedagogy, which is made up of culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy. I examine the basic tenets of all three cultural pedagogies to describe a culturally empowering pedagogy.

In Chapter 6, I illuminate how to create a culturally empowering pedagogy for classical education for African American students. I share eight strategies that teachers can use.
In the afterword, I continue the story begun in the preface, by examining the state of education for students in my school. I talk about the unsolved issues from my theoretical dissertation. I also discuss how my dissertation contributes to education and the field of curriculum studies.
CHAPTER 2
CLASSICAL EDUCATION

Anyone seeking a good human life benefits from learning in all of its breadth and depth.

-Zena Hitz, Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life

When imagining a different curriculum for my students, I will first examine classical education. My school was started as a public, classical school. We followed Core Knowledge, which is a contemporary, classical, knowledge-based curriculum. We emphasized content mastery. Teachers studied a topic and shared that knowledge with their students. Students were evaluated on how well they learned a topic. In order to write about classical education, I need to examine what it is. What does that term mean in the contemporary educational landscape? What are the features of classical education? What are its advantages and disadvantages? In this chapter, I will discuss the definition of classical education. I will elaborate on its advantages. By contrasting it with progressive education, I will discuss classical education’s disadvantages.

In my discussion of classical education, I draw on the idea of culture. Kirkland (2014) defines culture as:

> a fluid space of practices influenced by shared knowledge, values, beliefs, and desires that channel and get channeled through and performed by a cast of human actors. It is a generative place, where people not only find sustenance for existing, but also produce the range of things that occupy, format, and make meaningful that existence. (p. 179)

People create culture by generating what is meaningful to them. Through art, music, writing, movies, sports, food, etc., people create what is important to them. Outsiders can look at another culture’s products to learn about that culture and what they value as a group. A common question in classical education is whose cultures are being elevated. Often people criticize classical education because they see classical education as promoting only one culture instead of many. They point to the many times that White, Western-European cultural works are being taught. They see classical education as leaving out the cultures of many students. As Shor (1992) wrote,
“No curriculum can be neutral. All forms of education are political because they can enable or inhibit the questioning habits of students, thus developing or disabling their critical relation to knowledge, schooling, and society” (pp. 12-13). Education can train students to become docile listeners or critical thinkers. Like other curricula, classical education is not neutral, and, in this chapter, I will discuss classical education and the messages that it sends.

Defining Classical Education

Over the centuries, classical education has taken on many forms. Sometimes people think of it only in its traditional form. According to Simmons (2002/2016):

Once classical education pointed to an elite course of instruction based upon Greek and Latin, the two great languages of the classical world. But it also delved into the history, philosophy, literature, and art of the Greek and Roman worlds, affording over time to the more perspicacious devotees a remarkably high degree of cultural understanding, an understanding that endured and marked the learner for life. (p. 13)

At first, classical education involved learning Greek and Latin and studying the history, art, philosophy, and literature of those cultures. Students would read Greek and Latin texts from the classical period. People thought of classical education as being elite or only open to (or even suitable for) a select few, which were usually wealthy White males. It was said to leave a legacy in its student’s life. By learning about Greek and Roman culture, students could learn what were considered “universal” truths and be well-prepared for their adult lives and professions.

According to Whitehead (1967):

In classics we endeavor by a thorough study of language to develop the mind in the regions of logic, philosophy, history and of aesthetic apprehension of literary beauty. The learning of the languages--Latin or Greek--is a subsidiary means for the furtherance of this ulterior object. (p. 63)

When I read Whitehead’s words about the “thorough study of language,” I thought back to the time when I first started teaching at my classical school. During the first few weeks of the school
year, I noticed that I was critiquing the language I used, and I found myself pondering the meanings of the words I chose. I would question the aptness of my words. As a math teacher, I was not used to thinking about language, unless it was math vocabulary. I realized that I had started examining words because of the atmosphere of the classical school. My principal would expound upon the power of language during faculty meetings and his attention to words had rubbed off on me. This “thorough study of language” exemplifies classical education.

Whitehead also wrote that through studying logic, philosophy, history, and literary beauty, the mind is developed. The student can think more logically and appreciate literary beauty more deeply. The student understands history and philosophizes about life better. Whitehead believed that through the study of Latin and Greek, the student achieves this aim.

Over time, the term, classical education, has evolved to encompass a larger definition. Simmons (2002/2016) writes, “We apply ‘classic’ or ‘classical’ to anything we believe to be excellent and universal” (p. 14). To some people, classical education can mean an excellent education or focusing on universal themes (Though critics would argue that we cannot define universal themes for all people). In fact, according to Simmons (2002/2016), “Thus nowadays classical education [may] refer to something not linked to the classical world at all—never mind the languages—and get equated with what might once have been called simply traditional or orthodox education” (p. 14). To be classically trained, a student probably should learn Greek and Latin, but they do not have to anymore. They could consider their education classical if they read original texts, like the “Declaration of Independence,” rather than a summary of the text, or if they learned from lectures by the teacher instead of constructing their own knowledge doing groupwork. One of the criticisms of classical education being what is “good” or “pure” is that there could be more than one perspective of what is “good” or “pure.” Another criticism could be the question of who gets to decide what is “good” or “pure?”

Another way of looking at classical education is that one pursues the humanities or liberal arts through it. Simmons (2002/2016) writes, “Classical education describes the quest for what
has also been called a ‘liberal education’ or, more particularly, an education in the ‘humanities’” (p. 14). By studying classical education, one pursues the humanities. With this new definition of classical education, we need to define the humanities and liberal arts. According to Whitehead (1967), “In its essence a liberal education is an education for thought and for aesthetic appreciation. It proceeds by imparting a knowledge of the masterpieces of thought, of imaginative literature, and of art” (p. 46). Through a liberal education or studying the liberal arts, one learns to appreciate what is beautiful. A scholar gains an aesthetic pleasure through studying its literature, philosophy, and art. Again, who gets to decide what is beautiful?

Mulcahy (2008) wrote, “The term ‘liberal education’ has also connoted an education pursued for its own sake, that is, as a leisure pursuit for self-cultivation as opposed to some ulterior purpose such as vocational preparation” (p. 4). One is educated liberally to grow as a person, not to qualify for a job. It is education for the joy of learning, and it enriches the learner. Mulcahy (2008) goes on to say that a liberal education “has a two-sided nature: the development of intellectual skills and the understanding of a broad range of knowledge” (p. 4). Proponents of liberal education say that it helps students to think more effectively and to comprehend a vast amount of knowledge. According to Mulcahy (2008), liberal education “is directed toward a person’s inherent potential to know and to enjoy knowledge” (p. 5). As humans, we strive to know information, and liberal education capitalizes on that innate ability. We enjoy learning new pieces of knowledge. Over the past few years, I have worked primarily with elementary students, and I have noticed that elementary school students in particular relish learning new information. Often, I will get to introduce a new above grade-level topic to them, like decimals, and their faces will light up as they learn about it. Then, weeks later, one of the students will tie in that topic as we are learning about something else. The room will fill up with choruses of “Oh yeah!” or “I remember that!” as students think back to what they had learned before. Liberal education takes advantage of the human love of learning new information.
If another definition of classical education is that one pursues the humanities through it, then what are the humanities? According to Botstein (1984), “When we speak of teaching the humanities, we ought to imply thereby teaching the whole range of disciplines that constitute the humanities—history, philosophy, literature, languages” (p. 30). Notice how these are the subjects that modern parents often advise their children not to study because if they get a degree in one of these subjects, their parents fear that they will not be able to find a good job. These are the “unemployable” subjects that one should focus on for a classical education. In fact, Bloom (1987) wrote, “The humanities are the repository for all of the classics now” (p. 372). The classics live in the humanities. Through the humanities, one can learn classically.

Benefits of Classical Education

In this section, I will write about the benefits of classical education. If classical education can be defined as the pursuit of the liberal arts and the humanities, then when we look at the benefits of pursuing a classical education, we look at the benefits of chasing the humanities and the liberal arts. Broudy (1984) argued that “the humanities are indispensable to all the educated citizens in a modern, presumably democratic, and undeniably technologically dominated society” (p. 16). Broudy believed that even the technologically dominated society of 1984 needed the humanities. The modern society of 2021 has an even greater dependence on technology and people still need the humanities. Why do people need the humanities or classical education? There are several benefits to classical education in its varied definitions. Classical education develops the whole person, provides a consistent education for all students, and prepares students for the unknown future.

Develops a Person

The first benefit of classical education is that it develops the whole person. A person could grow intellectually, emotionally, morally, and aesthetically through classical education. Whitehead (1967) believed, “The pleasure and the discipline of character to be derived from an education based mainly on classical literature and classical philosophy has been demonstrated by
centuries of experience” (p. 61). We know that classical education benefits people because of the evidence over the years. Not only was it pleasurable, but classical education also developed one’s character. Buchner (2015) writes that Kant believed, “It is enrapturing to fancy that human nature will be better and better developed through education, and that this can be brought into a form suitable to humanity” (p. 109). Schooling molds people into more humane forms of themselves and develops their character.

Tracy Lee Simmons also believed that classical education developed a person’s mind and spirit. According to Simmons (2002/2016), “The hard, precipitous path to classical education ideally led not to knowledge alone, but to the cultivation of mind and spirit. . .. The climb was meant to transform one’s intellectual and aesthetic nature as well” (p. 16). Not only did classical education improve a person’s knowledge, mind and spirit, but also refined his/her appreciation of beauty and the intellect. Classical education improved a person’s mind. Livingstone (1916/2019) wrote, “The knowledge may be picked up later, but the training of the mind never” (p. 24). He believed that only classical education benefited students by training their minds to think, and that all other forms of education would not train the mind as well as classical education did.

For centuries, people believed that classical education improved the student. According to Simmons (2002/2016):

Classical education was thought to improve the learner, not simply make him more knowledgeable or tolerant or mentally skillful, but better and stronger, just as there survives today a residual belief that one who has, say, read and digested all of Shakespeare is better, more insightful, than one who has not. (p. 19; emphasis in original)

Shakespearean plays bring such insight into human nature that we would believe that someone, who has read them, would know more about human nature than someone, who has not read them. Likewise, classical education was thought to benefit the student by making him/her sounder. By being classically trained, students would become stronger intellectually and emotionally.
Proponents of classical education also believed that it should, and often did, lead students to wisdom. Simmons (2002/2016) believed that classical education should strive to lead students to “wisdom, to a quality of knowledge tempered by experience and imbued with understanding” (p. 30). Through classical education, students could gain wisdom and grow in understanding.

This wisdom gained through classical education should enable students to lead morally sound lives. According to D. Mulcahy (2013), classical education “ought to enable one to develop a sense of priorities in life, a system of values for the conduct of daily living or what might be called a personal philosophy” (p. 168). Classical education should give its learner wisdom to lead a good life. Its teachings would help the student to determine what is good and seek that path.

Students learn values and priorities through classical education. Bloom (1987) argued, “A good program of liberal education feeds the student’s love of truth and passion to live a good life” (p. 345). Bloom believed that when students pursued classical education, they learned to love truth and lead a solid life. He thought that classical education gave students a foundation, on which to build a wonderful life.

While classical education develops a person morally, it should also improve the mind intellectually. According to Livingstone (1916/2019):

While supporting any attempt to improve the teaching of science where it is deficient, and to bring more science, where it is needed in national life, we shall remember that an education based on physical science would not only leave the mind unflexible, unsympathetic, unimaginative, undeveloped, but would ignore what is more important than the Cosmos itself. (p. 54)

Through this argument, Livingstone is saying that the inverse is true: an education based on the classics would make the mind flexible, sympathetic, imaginative, and developed. Students should not just study sciences, but they should study the classics as well. The classics will help to make the student’s mind more well-rounded. According to Livingstone (1916/2019), education’s main
purpos e is “the training of an inquisitive, acute, industrious, patient, truth-loving mind, which knows which facts are essential and what are unimportant, when a thing is proved, and when it is not” (p. 104). A classical education helps the student to think critically and wisely. They can judge arguments more shrewdly.

The humanities also help us to live. According to Broudy (1984), “We think of [the humanities] explicitly while studying them in school, but in life we think and feel and act with them—tacitly, without being able to recall many of the details” (p. 18; emphasis in original). The humanities guide our lives and often we do not even realize that they motivate us to certain actions. The classic and groundbreaking books we read inform our choices.

Classical education also develops a person aesthetically. It gives the learner an appreciation for the finer things. In his chapter on the knowledge-centered curriculum, Ellis (2004) writes, “An educated person is one who appreciates the finer things in life, including the arts, culture, heritage, and noble traditions” (p. 95). Proponents of classical education argue that studying the classics will help the student to appreciate beauty and culture. Their appreciation of beauty in life will be a mark of their education. In a translation of Plato’s Republic, Bloom (1991) wrote, “Due to his having the right kind of dislikes, he would praise the fine things; and, taking pleasure in them and receiving them into his soul, he would be reared on them and become a gentleman” (p. 80). Plato argued that education would enable a boy to learn to appreciate the finer things and to grow into a gentleman. In classical education, people believe that there are certain objects or ideas that should be liked because they are beautiful, truthful, or appealing and there are others that should be disliked because they are deceitful, hideous, or off-putting. While postmodernists would argue that beauty and truth are subjective, classical education advocates still believe that classical education should grow a person aesthetically.

Another way that classical education develops a person is by giving the student insight into character. Classical education relies heavily on literature. According to Ravitch (2013):
[Students] will gain insight into character through the study of literature. By reading good and great works of fiction, students learn about character, motivation, kindness, greatness of spirit, imagination, the depths of evil, chicanery, and other aspects of human nature. Literature provides students with the opportunity to experience life through the eyes of other people in other times and other places. (p. 239)

Ravitch alludes to the canon through her reference of great and good books, and while critics argue that the notion of a canon is limiting and elitist, Ravitch argues that there are many classic works of fiction that inspire students. While there should not be just one list of “great books,” students need to read books that have endured for generations in addition to modern works. By reading books that stand the test of time, students will experience the lives of other people and learn about all kinds of human nature. Livingstone (1916/2019) wrote, “Education, it has been said, should knock windows into the world for us” (p. 25). Literature is one aspect of education, and it broadens a student’s experience of the world. Through literature, students can discover more about the world. Books offer a way for students to view the larger world beyond their own experiences.

Livingstone believed that students should study history and literature to understand the world around them. According to Livingstone (1916/2019), “The world is far more intelligible to us if we have studied history and literature. We understand Hamlet or Brutus, when we meet them in the flesh, far more readily if we have already met them in Shakespeare” (p. 37). When we encounter a diversity of personalities in literature, then we are better equipped for dealing with people in the real world. Also, we can question current policies when we compare them with policies in the past. Livingstone (1916/2019) wrote:

So instead of handing our youth over wholly to mathematics, to live with the abstract skeleton of the world, or to science, to study the causes of the phenomena of the physical universe, we hand him over to literature, to the prophets of humanity, in the hope that he
may learn to see the world as they saw it, and catch something of their joy, nobility and
inspiration. (p. 50)
Livingstone believed that literature was important because it gave a new perspective to students
and it inspired them. It also could bring joy to its readers. A student grounded solely in the
sciences would not be able to understand humanity as well as a student based in literature.

Another way that classical education develops students intellectually is through providing
knowledge to students. Other forms of curricula are more student-centered and are not as
systematic about providing information. According to Hirsch (1988):

Supplying missing knowledge to children early is of tremendous importance for
enhancing their motivation and intellectual self-confidence, not to mention their
subsequent ability to learn new materials. Yet schools will never systematically impart
missing background information as long as they continue to accept the formalistic
principle that specific information is irrelevant to ‘language arts skills.’ (p. 111)
Hirsch believed that students needed a lot of information in order to build knowledge. He
criticized that notion that language arts skills could be taught in a content vacuum. He also argued
for a systematic way of supplying knowledge to students, so that students could build on the
knowledge learned in earlier grades and students would not have to learn about the same topics or
read the same books from year to year. Hirsch (1999) writes, “Just as it takes money to make
money, it takes knowledge to make knowledge” (p. 20). He believed that students learned more
quickly if they already had prior knowledge about that topic. He also believed that students
understood more easily if they had the missing knowledge. Hirsch (2007) wrote, “To become a
good comprehender, a child needs a great deal of knowledge” (p. 8). To understand what he/she
has read, a child needs to have knowledge about that topic. Hirsch believed that a classical,
knowledge-based curriculum supplied systematic information to students best.

This idea of content being central to the act of reading goes against a student-centered or
Educational progressivism is a sure means for preserving the social status quo, whereas
the best practices of educational conservatism are the only means whereby children from
disadvantaged homes can secure the knowledge and skills that will enable them to
improve their condition. (p. 7)

Students from more affluent homes come to school with different background knowledge than
students from disadvantaged homes. Often students from more affluent homes have the
background knowledge necessary to understand their school curriculum, while the students from
less affluent homes may not have the background information necessary.

In the spring of 2020, Georgia school buildings were closed due to the COVID-19
pandemic, so many schools transitioned to distance learning, including my own. That semester I
taught kindergarten through 5th grade math resource classes, so I often taught siblings of different
ages. Sometimes those siblings would come to my virtual live sessions together and I would work
with one sibling while the other waited and then they would switch. One time I worked with a
fourth-grade boy in a virtual session while his younger sister, who was in second grade, waited.

To try to keep her from turning on the television, which I knew would distract her older brother
and me from our work, I suggested that she read a book while she waited for me. Her older
brother promptly interjected, “She can’t read.” As her teacher, I knew that she could read.
However, I also suspected that reading a book at home might not be her first choice when she
could just watch the television while she waited to work with me. At the same time, I wondered if
she had access to books in her house. I knew that if I had been working with a more affluent
family and I had told the younger sibling to read a book while she waited, she probably would
have been able to grab a book quickly. Did this second-grade girl have easy access to books? This
lack of books in the houses of some of my students reminded me of Hirsch’s argument that
students from less affluent homes typically come to school with less background knowledge.
School becomes an even more crucial place for students to secure the background knowledge to
gain more knowledge.
Hirsch believed that schools should fill in the knowledge gaps through teaching a systematic content-rich curriculum. He felt that a more progressive curriculum would leave out essential knowledge. Hirsch (2007) writes, “A content-neutral, skills-oriented concept of education has the unintended effect of depressing reading scores and diminishing the shared content we need for communication and solidarity within the nation as a whole” (p. 107). Hirsch believed that there was a shared content that the nation needed and that educators needed to teach this content. If they did not, then the nation would not have a shared-knowledge base. By teaching the students to read through content-rich curriculum, students would become better readers. According to Hirsch (1988), “Literacy, an essential aim of education in the modern world is no autonomous, empty skill but depends upon literate culture” (p. xvii). Students need prior knowledge in order to become literate. A classical education helps students to develop intellectually by providing knowledge to students. Students needed to learn the content necessary to bring understanding to their reading. A systematic classical education was the way to bring in the necessary knowledge.

Also, classical education proponents believe that students needed to be guided by adults. Ellis (2004) writes, “A fixed idea, a recurring theme, of the knowledge-centered curriculum, is that there is a wisdom that teachers and other experts possess, that children simply do not have” (p. 108). Classical education falls into the category of knowledge-centered curricula because it focuses on the teaching of information. Teachers of classical education have a wisdom that they pass on to students through their lessons. Teachers use their own knowledge to guide students to greater understanding. Students cannot teach themselves because they lack the knowledge that is gained through education.

Hirsch did not advocate for teachers to teach the same information from generation to generation. With each new generation, Hirsch believed that the knowledge needed changed a little bit. Hirsch (1988) wrote, “I’m not suggesting that we teach our children exactly what our grandparents learned. We should teach children current mainstream culture” (p. 18). While
students could read some classics and learn about ancient history, they also need to learn about the modern world and read contemporary books. Teachers should modify their selections for the current generation, and they could do so using classical education.

Another scholar, who saw classical education as providing knowledge, was Livingstone (1916/2019), who wrote, “The classics may have taken their place in education because they were once the only keys to knowledge; but it does not follow that they should be condemned because they are no longer required for this particular purpose” (p. 58). He believed that the classics once were the only way to knowledge, but there were now other ways to grow in knowledge. Even though there were other paths to knowledge, he still believed that the classics were an important path. According to Livingstone (1916/2019), “But it is true that the history of Greece and Rome is the history of the origins of the modern world and that this is one of the reasons why we study them” (pp. 58-59). While critics might argue that the history of Greece and Rome lacked relevance, Livingstone believed that studying that history was important because it provided clarity on the history of the modern world.

Martha C. Nussbaum is a liberal arts advocate, who saw a positive shift in the understanding of students over the years. Looking at the progression of the liberal arts curricula in colleges over the years, Nussbaum (2010) writes, “Young people these days rarely leave college as ignorant about the non-Western world as students of my own generation routinely did” (p. 123). She believes that students are taught more about the non-Western world than they were in the past, and this knowledge helps them to understand the world better. By ensuring that classical education encompasses more than just the knowledge of the Western world, classical education can be modified to be more liberating for students.

Another way that classical education develops a person is through the emphasis on foreign languages, specifically Latin. In classical education, a student learns foreign languages. Knowing Latin enables one to learn other languages more easily. Livingstone (1916/2019) argued, “Latin lies behind French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese; it is a great help in learning these
languages, and essential to a scientific knowledge of them. It has also contributed largely to English” (p. 209). Latin is the foundation of the romance languages and guides English. Knowing Latin enables a student to grasp English and many other languages better.

I never studied Latin in school although I did learn a few Latin roots in English class. Our teacher taught us Latin roots so that we would be able to understand SAT words better. Instead of studying Latin, I studied German beginning in seventh grade, and I majored in it in college. When I was in ninth and tenth grade, I had German class the period before I had English class. That schedule worked out perfectly for me because I would often first learn about some part of German grammar that I would need to understand in order to conjugate the verb correctly and choose the right article for the noun and then I would go to English class and learn about the same part of grammar. I would understand that tense much better because I had had to master it in German in order to write and speak German correctly. Learning German helped me to master English, my native language, better as well. Just like learning German helped me to master English, studying Latin helps students learn other languages better.

All languages belong to a humanities-rich education. According to Botstein (1984), “Language is the business of the humanities; its grasp will empower our young students who are at the brink of taking their proper place in the sequence of generations” (p. 36). Through the humanities, students learn to command their own language and foreign languages. Mastering languages enables students to grow intellectually. Growing intellectually develops a person.

*Provides a Consistent Education for All Students*

The second benefit of classical education is that it provides a consistent education for all students. One of the leading proponents of a liberal education for all was Mortimer Adler (1982/1998), who wrote:

a democratic society must provide equal educational opportunity not only by giving to all its children the same quantity of public education—the same number of years in school—
but also by making sure to give to all of them, all with no exceptions, the same quality of education. (p. 4)

Adler believed that every child was entitled to a quality education, which, for him, was a liberal arts-based education. He believed that not only should all students be in the school for the same length of time, but they should all study the same or similar curricula. By making education universal in quantity and quality, society could become more democratic. He wrote, “basic schooling must have for all a quality that can be best defined, positively, by saying that it must be general and liberal; and negatively, by saying that it must be nonspecialized and non-vocational” (Adler, 1982/1998, p. 18; emphasis in original). Adler did not believe in technical schooling for some students. He believed that all students should have access to a liberal education.

Not only did Adler believe that a liberal arts education was for all students. Ravitch believed it as well. She writes, “If we mean to educate them, we must recognize that all children deserve a full liberal arts curriculum. . .. A democratic society cannot afford to limit the skills and knowledge of a liberal education only to children of privilege and good fortune” (Ravitch, 2013, p. 241). Ravitch did not believe that social class should keep students from a liberal arts education. All students deserve a liberal education.

Likewise, Livingstone believed that boys of every social class should have access to classical education. He wrote:

And surely it is not an excessive claim to make, that boys of all classes and of all secondary schools should have the chance, if they wish it, of studying a literature that is so great and a civilisation that has so deeply influenced the world. (Livingstone, 1916/2019, p. 278)

By literature and civilization, he was referring to those of the ancient Greeks and ancient Romans. Of course, he limits classical education to male students only, not female students, but he opened classical education up to boys of all social backgrounds, which, at that time, was openminded.
Simmons also agreed that almost anyone could handle the classics, by saying “Anyone with a modicum of talent and energy can take on large dollops that classics offers” (Simmons, 2002/2016, p. 25). While not saying that everyone deserved the classics, Simmons argued that most people could benefit from the study of them. Thus, the second benefit of classical education is that it is for everyone.

*Prepares Students for the Unknown Future*

Finally, classical education prepares the learner for the unknown future. Ellis (2004) writes that “the well-educated person is invariably the most adaptable, the most prepared for the unknown, the best citizen” (p. 95). Many believe that education prepares one for life. Proponents of classical education have long thought that this form of education prepared students the best because classical education was a well-rounded education. Mulcahy (2008) writes, “And so the idea of a liberal education as a necessary foundation for the professional studies became a reality by the Middle Ages. Once firmly in place, it would not be easily dislodged” (p. 6). Many thought that classical education was the best preparation for students of professional studies.

Even at the turn of the twentieth century, some scholars still believed that classical education prepared one the best. According to Livingstone (1916/2019):

> An open and alert mind, which understands human nature and its possibilities, which can judge and sympathise, which because of its wide survey and outlook on the world creates new opportunities and developments, prospers in commerce or in any work; but it is the child of a varied education, not of narrow technical training. (pp. 25-26)

Livingstone believed that technical training could not prepare students as well as a liberal or classical education. He felt that by studying the humanities, students would learn how to reason and relate to the vast world. They would learn how to comprehend the diversity of human nature. They would learn how to succeed in any future arena because classical education is varied. It touches on many diverse topics.
Finn and Ravitch also believed that the humanities would continue to benefit the student later in life. They wrote:

To be sure, the relationship between knowledge of the humanities and immediate employability is often indirect. Though we have yet to meet a lawyer, journalist, or public relations expert whose daily work does not draw upon the knowledge and intellectual skills we ascribe to the humanities. (Finn & Ravitch, 1984, p. 242)

They saw people working in professional fields relying on what they had learned in the humanities. Studying the humanities gave them a greater foundation for the professional lives. Students of the humanities learned to think and reason, and they got exposure to a wide variety of topics, which prepared them well for professional life.

Finn and Ravitch also believed that the humanities prepared the best citizens. According to them:

Well taught and well learned, the humanities are the strongest democratizing force that formal education can muster. . . They liberate the mind, they inform the citizen, they hone the intellect, they supply criteria by which assertions and claims can be judged, and they train the analytic skills that give such judgments power. (Finn & Ravitch, 1984, p. 241)

They believed that the humanities made the best citizens because the varied subjects freed the mind and enabled students to think critically and wisely. Students could make prudent judgments because their classical education had trained them to be logical.

Proponents of classical education believe that it develops the whole person, it is the best preparation for all learners, and it prepares a student for any future. They see classical education as growing a person spiritually, mentally, aesthetically, and emotionally. They also believe that any student would benefit from classical education because it is a well-rounded education. Finally, they believe that no matter what field you will work in, classical education lays the best foundation. In their eyes, classical education benefits every student, who partakes in it.
Disadvantages of Classical Education

While there are many advantages to classical education, there are also drawbacks. Scholars have criticized classical education for being too elitist, alienating to students, not suitable for all learners, and being too passive for students. In this section, I will discuss the criticisms of classical education. To do so, I will draw of the work of some of the classical education advocates that I discussed in the section above as well as some progressive educators, such as Paulo Freire, Donaldo Macedo, and Ira Shor. While being critical about schools in general, Kohn (2012) makes a point that can apply to classical education, by saying:

An awful lot is wrong with [schools]: the way conformity is valued over curiosity and enforced with rewards and punishments, the way children are compelled to compete against one another, the way curriculum so often privileges skills over meaning, the way students are prevented from designing their own learning . . . (Kohn, 2012, p. 80)

In classical education, students are viewed as receptacles to be filled with the wisdom of their teachers. Since classical education relies on the wisdom of the teachers to guide the students, students cannot design their own learning. This form of education can teach them to be passive. The curriculum can also privilege one group of people over another. Students are taught to conform rather than be curious. This leads to disadvantages of classical education.

Not Suited for All Learners

The first disadvantage of classical education is that it is not suited for all learners. Alfred North Whitehead (1967), a British mathematician and philosopher, wrote:

For certain people [liberal education] is a very good education. It suits their type of mind and the circumstances amid which their life is passed. But more has been claimed for it than this. All education has been judged adequate or defective according to its approximation to this sole type. (p. 46)
Since classical education was the gold standard for centuries, it has been used to judge other forms of education. Whitehead argued that it did not suit all learners. Some students did not have the right aptitude for it. Likewise, Nel Noddings (2007), an American philosopher, writes:

At this point, it should be clear that an effort to force all children into the same course of study—however well-intended the attempts—is, from the perspective of postmodernism, a totalizing move. It improperly . . . assimilates all children to the model of an elite established by criteria constructed by an exclusive few. (p. 80)

Noddings admits that the desire to demand classical education for all comes out of noble intentions. However, she sees that the model is limiting because in this model only the elite few decides what is suitable for everyone to learn. This model does not celebrate or appreciate the diversity of all students. According to Noddings (2007):

But critics of the critical theorists—among them many feminists—argue that the standard liberal arts curriculum is merely the manifestation of privileged knowledge. Forcing all children to take algebra, physics, and foreign language will not in itself give them a share of privileged knowledge. Indeed, such a move may very well extend the hegemony of the dominant class. Not only will students be deprived of the choices Dewey thought so important to participation in democratic processes, but they may come to believe that there is only one ideal or model of educated persons. In a society that needs a vast array of excellences, this could be debilitating. For children whose talents are ignored or undervalued, it could be tragic. (p. 75; emphasis in original)

By holding all students up to the same, limiting standard, students, who differ from that standard, will believe that their individual, unique gifts are not valuable. They might compare themselves to others and determine that they are not as important or as intelligent. They might refrain from developing their own gifts and talents because they think that their talents are not as important to society. Even though a taste of the liberal arts might be shared with all the students, that small
taste might not be enough to level the playing field. The real victors after graduation might be the elites, who dictated that all must study the liberal arts.

**Elitist and Alienating**

A second criticism of classical education is that it is elitist and alienating. Even advocates of classical education, such as Finn and Ravitch, concede that classical education can give off the impression that it is too elite for the average person. According to Finn and Ravitch (1984):

> [P]artly because their “usefulness” is not widely acknowledged, the humanities also suffer from an aura of elitism, dilettantism, even preciousness that can lead those persons who care for them to be wary of saying so in public and those persons with other priorities to dismiss the humanities as cultural playthings of the upper classes. (p. 239)

When parents push their children to major in lucrative fields, such as medicine, law or engineering, they demonstrate their belief that the humanities are useless and unimportant. Because people do not view the classics and the humanities as useful subjects, they think that the classics and the humanities are elitist.

One reason why classical education may be viewed as being elitist is because its curriculum is often the stronghold of dead, White, Western European men. Barzun (1944/1981) wrote, “There [in schools], only dead men tell the tales, to the detriment of both pupils and great authors” (p. 210). This over-reliance on dead men’s tales and history does not benefit students and does not allow students to discover wonderful, new authors. According to C. Mulcahy (2013):

> As such, cultural literacy is considered elitist as the subset of the cultural knowledge to be learned has been identified by a specific group of people and therefore the cultural knowledge included is not representative or inclusive of all students’ cultures. As a result, a cultural literacy curriculum privileges certain students over others. (p. 17)

In this example, one group of people decides what is important for everyone to know. A curriculum that privileges the culture of certain students over others is elitist. Students feel
excluded from their school’s curriculum. By privileging other students’ cultures over theirs, schools are telling students that their cultures (and, by extension, they) are not important. This causes students to disrupt and react. Freire and Macedo (1987) wrote, “[S]tudents are reacting to a curriculum and other material conditions in schools that negate their histories, cultures, and day-to-day experiences” (p. 121). The curriculum denies their culture. It abolishes the experiences that they bring to school. Students react to that rejection by acting out or withdrawing.

Freire and Macedo often found this negation in the academic approach to reading. They wrote, “On the one hand, it ignores the life experience, the history, and the language practice of students. On the other, it overemphasizes the mastery and understanding of classical literature” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 146). In classical education, educators rely on the academic approach to reading, which disregards the language, experiences, and cultures that students bring to school. This approach to reading also overemphasizes the comprehension of the classics. Freire and Macedo found that schools used language as a powerful tool to oppress students, through “the way language may either confirm or deny the life histories and experiences of the people who use it” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 149). The students, who belong to the mainstream culture, are secure in the school language, which affirms their lives and experiences. Students, who belong to marginalized cultures, may not use their language in schools and their histories and experiences are rejected.

When schools ignore the languages of their students, they become alienating places. According to Macedo (1994):

This traditional elitist approach to education is inherently alienating in nature. On the one hand it ignores the life experiences, history, culture, and language practices of students. On the other, it overemphasizes the mastery and understanding of classical literature and the use of great books as the only vehicle that enables one to search for the “Good and True.” (p. 63)
Schools ignore students and the strengths and backgrounds that they bring to school. By promoting a traditional approach to education, teachers and those in authority discourage students from sharing their experiences, history and culture in schools. Schools also overemphasize the classics as the best way to find the good and beautiful. Students may begin to believe that their knowledge is not valuable and that their cultures are not sources of knowledge. According to Chomsky (2003/2011):

> The point is, it doesn’t matter what you read, what matters is how you read it. ... there’s a lot of cultural wealth out there from all over the place, and to learn what it means to be culturally rich, you can explore almost anywhere; there’s no fixed subset that is the basis of truth and understanding. (p. 27; emphasis in original)

Chomsky believes that there is more than one source of knowledge and students need to explore all kinds of cultural wealth. Students can learn many different truths from a myriad of sources and cultures. Students need to read critically from a variety of sources, and they will learn different truths and understandings.

Another reason that classical education is elitist is because the material often belongs to the culture of a small group of individuals. According to Aronowitz and Giroux (1988):

> It is a position that advocates a social system in which a select cadre of intellectuals, economically privileged groups, and their professional servants are the only individuals deemed fit to possess the culture’s sacred canon of knowledge, which assures their supremacy. (p. 174)

The only knowledge deemed suitable belongs to the social and economic elites. They decide that this canon is mandatory, and this ensures that they will continue to be the elites and that they will hold all the power. In other words, they decide the rules of the game, and, by doing so, they can favor the game toward themselves.

Since the elites hold the keys to literacy, they can create a system in which they are valued, and others are disvalued. They determine what students read when they learn to read. According to Aronowitz and Giroux (1988):
Literacy is political because literacy represents a set of practices that can provide the conditions through which people can be empowered or disempowered. It is pedagogical because literacy always involves social relations in which learning takes place; power legitimates a particular view of the world, and privilege, a specific rendering of knowledge. (p. 193)

Literacy may appear to be neutral, but instead it is political. Students gain or lose power based on whether their cultures are present in the literature. Students, who are privileged, assume that they are the victors. Students, who are marginalized, accept that they do not matter in the eyes of the privileged ones. The elites, who are in power, broadcast their version of history, which is Eurocentric and privileged. This form of literacy reproduces the dominant class. According to Macedo (1994):

This failure to address questions of cultural capital or various structural inequalities means that the traditional approach to education based solely on Western cultural values will invariably reproduce the cultural capital of the dominant class, to which traditional education is intimately tied. (p. 64)

Macedo criticized advocates of traditional education for not questioning inequalities. He saw the traditional education, of which classical education would be an example, as promoting only Western values and seeking to replicate the dominant class. This traditional approach to education did not promote other viewpoints or cultures. This disregarding of others leads to a rigid curriculum. According to Macedo (1994):

When curriculum designers ignore important variables such as social-class differences, when they ignore the incorporation of the subordinate cultures’ values in the curriculum, and when they refuse to accept and legitimize the students’ language, their actions point to the inflexibility, insensitivity, and rigidity of a curriculum that was designed to benefit those who wrote it. (Macedo, 1994, p. 104)
Macedo believed that traditional curricula, such as classical curricula, benefited the dominant class. He felt that these curricula left out the languages and cultures of marginalized students. The curricula even left out positive aspects of these other cultures, such as values that they held. This ignoring of groups of students demonstrated to the students that they and their people had little value according to the curriculum designers. According to Henry A. Giroux:

Literal becomes the ideological vehicle through which to legitimate schooling as a site for character development; in this case, literacy is associated with the transmission and mastery of a unitary Western tradition based on the virtues of hard work, industry, respect for family, institutional authority, and an unquestioning respect for the nation. In short, literacy becomes a pedagogy of chauvinism dressed up in the lingo of the Great Books. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, Introduction, p. 3)

Giroux believed that the classical curriculum only promoted Western values and traditions. This curriculum did not endorse other values, such as putting one’s community before the individual. He saw the “Great Books” as promoting a certain kind of character development. Any values that differed from the values of the Western tradition were disregarded. However, Macedo did not see the “Great Books” as completely worthless. He wrote:

Without minimizing the importance and value of the Great Books, one can, however, say with near-certainty that the education one receives from studying them endorses the dominant values and meanings that are mostly responsible for the cruel and stark poverty and human misery that cities like East St. Louis exemplify. (Macedo, 1994, pp. 64-65)

He conceded that the “Great Books” had some value, but they also promoted inequalities and provided the justifications for people living in poverty. The lessons in the “Great Books” promised that with hard work, one could be successful and promoted independence rather than care and sharing with one another. The “Great Books” taught students that they had to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and, while it is true that hard work brings success, that is not the whole story. Advocates of personal responsibility are quick to discount the fact that people
rise out of poverty with the help of others. Poverty cycles do not break easily. Students should read the “Great Books” with a critical eye.


the way to improve the unhappy situation of schools-and-great-books is to read more of them, oftener, and in many different kinds. There are many great books for every age and taste, but they must be fitted more or less to each child, or to each group of children.

(Barzun, 1944/1981, p. 213)

Instead of throwing out “Great Books,” educators should expand their list of “Great Books” by picking out ones that will speak to their students and drawing upon a diverse group of authors. Like many already do, teachers should introduce students to books that they had loved as children and find new favorites to share with them.

Another issue that Macedo saw with the “Great Books” and classical education, specifically the cultural literacy promoted by E. D. Hirsch, is that students learned some facts without learning to think critically about why those facts exist. Macedo (1994) wrote, “Hirsch’s ‘shopping mall’ cultural literacy gives rise to a type of education based on the accumulation of selected cultural facts that are disconnected from the sociocultural world that generated these ‘facts’ in the first place” (p. 67). Students learn about the explorers without discussing how they brought disease, destruction and destitution to the native people already living in the lands that the explorers “found.” They learn history from the point of view of the victor, not the victim. They learn only one side of the story. According to Macedo (1994):

A more honest account of our Western cultural heritage would not only monumentalize the great deeds in museums and great books but would also look at Western civilization through a magnifying mirror so we could begin to see the grotesque and barbaric images of the Western cultural heritage. (p. 87)
Students need to look at the Western civilization critically. There are great deeds to commemorate, but there are also injustices that need to be discussed and learned from. Students need to learn both sides of the story and how to think critically about historical events. According to Macedo (1994):

If [Bloom and other conservative educators] were to acknowledge the elitist, antidemocratic, and discriminatory nature of traditional approaches to learning, they would understand the perceived anger and demands from the members of those groups who have been denied access to the bastions of knowledge and power. (p. 63)

Macedo believed that Bloom and other conservative educators would not admit that their way of education was discriminatory and elitist. Macedo understood the anger from the marginalized groups, but he did not believe that Bloom and other educators did. Macedo argued that instead of educators blindly believing that traditional forms of education were the best, they needed to look at the flaws of those ways of schooling.

Nussbaum criticized Bloom and other conservative educators for decrying diversity and trying to protect certain American traditions that they believed were tenuous and in danger of being lost to American society. She wrote, “If Bloom and others do think that American traditions are so fragile that mere knowledge of other ways will cause young people to depart from them, why are they so keen on endorsing and shoring up these fragile traditions?” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 33). She believed that students should study many different traditions, not just the dominant, American ones.

Many educators believed that it was too big of a responsibility forced on marginalized students when they were told to use traditional educational methods to improve their lives. According to Shor (1992):

Individuals from minority groups and the lower classes who use teacher-talk and Eurocentric culture to climb up need bulldog stamina to tolerate the tedium of passive
schooling, the indignity of surrendering their speaking idiom for an elite one, and the long
delay in rewards from the job market. (p. 109)

Telling students that classical education is the only path to success and that they will have to
work hard, deny their own culture, and wait for a decade or longer for the rewards is asking for
them to put with injustices that that the proponents of classical education, including many
privileged, White educators, would not be willing to put up with. Educators should imagine the
situations reversed: What if they came to school and had to learn a whole new way of speaking
and when they questioned it, they were told that it would be worth it in ten years or so? Would
educators put up with that?

Oftentimes Black and other marginalized might not feel like they belonged in class.

Writing about when Black students were first admitted to Harvard and could participate in a
liberal arts education, Nussbaum (1997) shared:

In short, for a black student being asked to study the great books was not like being asked
to do so for a white student. For the latter, it was an invitation into the elite stratum of
one’s own world. For the former, it was like going to a debutante party in whiteface and
knowing that one wasn’t on the invitation list. (p. 159)

Black students felt like they were not invited into this education. They could not identify with
their curriculum as easily as White students could. White students might feel accepted into the
inner circle of White society by reading the “Great Books.” Black students, however, might feel
like they were having to pretend to be White in order to get into the conversation.

One of the criticisms made against classical education is that it is racist. However, Martha
C. Nussbaum (1997) argued:

Neither philosophy nor the study of literature nor even the study of ancient Greece and
Rome is per se a white racist undertaking. They are ways of seeing the world that are
open to all people. Sometimes we may indeed find racist ideas deeply lodged in the
standard ways of approaching a subject. . . . In general, whenever a domain of learning
has been deformed by bias or prejudice, this circumstance should be regarded as a challenge to pursue the truth more rigorously and to get rid of all that stifles it. (p. 176)

Instead of throwing out the classics because they contain racist ideas, students should critique them and seek out the lessons that they contain. By doing so, students will learn how to read critically, which will serve them well in the future.

As another way to fight against racist ideas, Nussbaum wanted to create a form of education, in which all are welcome and included. She wrote:

We are now trying to build an academy in which women, and members of religious and ethnic minorities, and lesbian and gay people, and people living in non-Western cultures can be seen and also heard, with respect and love, both as knowers and as objects of study. (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 7)

Nussbaum believed that all students had the right to study other cultures and their own. They all had knowledge to share and the right to be respected. Everyone should be welcome in education and they should not be required just to learn about Western civilization, but they should be able to learn about marginalized cultures as well. Nussbaum put a new spin on the idea of liberal education when she wrote, “an education that is ‘liberal’ in that it liberates the mind from the bondages of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 8). If liberal education truly liberates, then it is creating sensitive citizens, who work to end injustices in the world. This is an education that is culturally sustaining, which will be discussed in a later chapter.

For Nussbaum, diversity in education was crucial. According to Nussbaum (1997), “One of the errors that a diverse education can dispel is the false belief that one’s own tradition is the only one that is capable of self-criticism or universal aspiration” (p. 11). When students can study different cultures and traditions, then they learn that other cultures are able to be self-reflective and be aspirational. According to Aronowitz and Giroux (1988):
To acknowledge different forms of literacy is not to suggest that they should all be given equal weight. On the contrary, it is to argue that their differences are to be weighed against the capacity they have for enabling people to locate themselves in their own histories while simultaneously establishing the conditions for them to function as part of a wider democratic culture. (p. 193)

By recognizing different forms of literacy, educators demonstrate to students that many different viewpoints are valid. They also bring honor to their students’ heritages and they help their students to improve their democracy. Macedo (1994) believed that conservative educators got caught up in the idea of their ways being wiped out by multiculturalism. According to Macedo (1994), “If the Western cultural legionnaires honestly reflect . . ., they will come to the realization that the real issue is not Western culture versus multiculturalism. The fundamental issue is the recognition of humanity in us and in Others” (p. 89). Educators need to recognize the humanity in all people. By acknowledging the humanity in their marginalized students and people of their cultures, then teachers can educate better.

*Creates Passive Not Active Learners*

A third criticism of classical education is that it creates passive not active learners. Paulo Freire criticized traditional forms of education because he saw them as banking forms of education. Freire (1970/1996) wrote that the banking form of education:

> [T]urns [students] into “containers,” into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. (p. 53)

When students are containers, then they are passive recipients of knowledge. They do not think for themselves. Instead, they learn to memorize bits of information fed to them by the teacher. The teacher’s job is to fill them completely with information, so that no space remains in which to cram any more knowledge. Students listen. Teachers lecture. According to Whitehead (1967), “This overhaste to impart mere knowledge defeats itself. The human mind rejects knowledge
imparted in this way” (p. 32). Knowledge without understanding and reflection is meaningless. Humans cannot hold on to knowledge crammed into them. Also, information learned passively has little meaning to the learner. According to Chomsky (2003/2011), “It doesn’t matter how great the thoughts are, if they are simply imposed on you from the outside and you’re forced through them step by step, after you’re done you’ll have forgotten what they are” (p. 27). Students forget even the most amazing piece of knowledge if they are force-fed it and they do not identify with it.

In classical education, the teacher is the expert and decides what knowledge to share with the students. This can be disheartening to students. According to Gabbard (2003/2011):

Neither does the school afford the vast majority of children the opportunity to study the lives of people like themselves, much less the opportunity to study their own lives. The lives of people like themselves and the forces that shape those lives, it seems, are not worthy of study. This audible silence of the null curriculum further instills the economic worldview in the minds of its victims, teaching children that they should want to “become somebody,” that they should want to “make something of themselves,” meaning that they should strive to align their interests with those of the market and the state that enforces it. (p. 64)

Gabbard highlights the belief that students from outside the mainstream culture have that their lives are not important enough for others or themselves to study. They do not see people that look like them or come from similar backgrounds in the curriculum. They are taught that they need to affiliate themselves with the capitalist society in order to become someone important. The emphasis is put on them having to do something to become important. They need to align themselves with the mainstream culture. Their culture does not matter.

One of the ways that students bring knowledge into the classroom is through their affinity for popular culture. As I have become older, I have realized that I am losing touch with popular culture. I can think that I am still with it, but, sadly, I am not. Many educators are like me and are
losing touch with popular culture. Because we do not understand it, we do not see the value of it in the classroom and we can belittle its significance in the classroom and the lives of our students. According to Giroux and Simon (1989):

Educators who refuse to acknowledge popular culture as a significant basis of knowledge often devalue students by refusing to work with the knowledge that students actually have and so eliminate the possibility of developing a pedagogy that links school knowledge to the differing subject relations that help to constitute their everyday lives.

(p. 3)

Not only are educators devaluing the popular culture, but they are also degrading students. Students do not feel valuable and welcomed in the academic discussion in the classroom. Teachers are also shutting down any possibility of students finding a link between the popular culture that they brought to the classroom and the knowledge that they are learning in the official curriculum.

However, we know that “learning begins with the knowledge students bring with them to the classroom” (C. Mulcahy, 2013, p. 23). Unless students find a connection with the material that they are learning in the school, they will not learn. They need to be able to form their own link based on the knowledge that they possess already. As Delpit (2006) writes, “The teacher cannot be the only expert in the classroom. To deny students their own expert knowledge is to disempower them” (pp. 32-33; emphasis in original). Students have their own expert knowledge to bring to the classroom and they need to be empowered to share it with their peers and their teacher. This concept can be difficult for many teachers to learn. After going through a similar transformation, Gatto (1992/2005) wrote, “I dropped the idea that I was an expert whose job it was to fill the little heads with my expertise, and began to explore how I could remove those obstacles that prevented the inherent genius of children from gathering itself” (p. xxxiv). Gatto saw his students as having intelligence inside of them when they arrived at school and worked to make it possible for them to learn from themselves and their peers. Shor takes a more equitable
approach to the teacher-student teaching partnership. He wrote, “The teacher brings lesson plans, learning methods, personal experience, and academic knowledge to class but negotiates the curriculum with the students and begins with their language, themes, and understandings” (Shor, 1992, p. 16). According to Shor, the teacher has some responsibility in planning and guiding the class, but the students have important input also. The students should help teach.

This idea that the student should be an active not passive learner has gained traction over the past couple decades. Biesta (2006) writes, “[New] theories have challenged the idea that learning is the passive intake of information and have instead argued that knowledge and understanding are actively constructed by the learner, often in cooperation with other learners” (p. 17). In order to learn, students need to be active. They need to create the knowledge themselves and with their peers. According to Chomsky (2003/2011):

Real education is about getting people involved in thinking for themselves—and that’s a tricky business to know how to do well, but clearly it requires that whatever it is that you are looking at has to somehow catch people’s interest and make them want to think, and make them want to pursue and explore. And just regurgitating ‘Good Books’ is absolutely the worst way to do it—and that’s just a way of turning people into automata.

(p. 28; emphasis in original)

Chomsky believes that students should cogitate for themselves. Teachers may inspire them, but they need to teach children content that catches their attention. Students must want to explore that content. Teachers should not just expect students to recite the “Great Books.” Shor believed that the way to catch students’ interest was to relate what they were learning to their lives. Shor (1992) wrote, “To teach skills and information without relating them to society and to students’ contexts turns education into an authoritarian transfer of official words, a process that severely limits student development as democratic citizens” (p. 18). Educators should relate the lesson to the students’ environments. One of the first lessons you are taught as a math teacher is to bring in
real-world examples that will help the students understand the math concept. The same holds true for other subjects.

One way to relate a student’s education to their context is through building on the student’s culture. C. Mulcahy (2013) wrote, “Learning becomes multicultural when it builds on the cultural diversity of the students, and it is dialogic, in that it allows for a mutual exchange of ideas and concerns between student and teacher” (p. 24). Tying in the lesson to the cultures of the students enlivens the learning and makes it more relevant for the students. Mulcahy stresses that the exchange of ideas is mutual, so neither the teacher nor the student should dominate over the other. This activates the learning. Learning that is dialogic is an education, for which Paulo Freire would advocate.

Shor was another educator, who deplored a passive education. Talking about the students in his remedial writing course, Shor (1992) wrote, “Something is very wrong with their education when it suppresses instead of develops their skills and intellectual interests” (p. 9). Shor felt like his students’ prior education had quashed their knowledge and skills. Instead of their former teachers encouraging them to learn and develop their skills and own interests, the teachers taught them to comply and follow one path. This was not what Shor felt like they needed. According to Shor (1992), “The students need a challenging education of high quality that empowers them as thinkers, communicators, and citizens” (p. 10). Students need challenge and high expectations. Educators need to teach them that their words and thoughts have power. Shor (1992) wrote, “Empowered students make meaning and act from reflection, instead of memorizing facts and values handed to them” (p. 12). One of the criticisms of classical education is that students are taught to memorize facts and are indoctrinated with Western cultural values. Shor believed that a more active education would enable students to create meaning from self-reflection and thinking for themselves.

To create an active education, Shor believed in a participatory pedagogy. According to Shor (1992), “A participatory pedagogy, designed from cooperative exercises, critical thought,
student experience, and negotiated authority in class, can help students feel they are in sufficient command of the learning process to perform at their peak” (p. 21). Shor believed that students in a participatory pedagogy helped students to excel. Students were given control of their education from the teachers. They realized that they had the power to learn. Teachers worked with students to share authority and knowledge in the classroom. According to Shor (1992), “Participation provides students with active experiences in class, through which they develop knowledge that is reflective understanding, not mere memorization” (p. 21). Again, Shor emphasized that students should not just memorize facts, but they should understand what they learned. A participatory pedagogy allows students to be more active in the classroom and in their own educations.

Being active in the classroom benefits students in many ways. First, imagine the opposite. Being passive in the classroom creates negative emotions in the students and has harmful consequences for the students. According to Shor (1992):

Unilateral teacher authority in a passive curriculum arouses in many students a variety of negative emotions: self-doubt, hostility, resentment, boredom, indignation, cynicism, disrespect, frustration, the desire to escape. These student affects are commonly generated when an official culture and language are imposed from the top down, ignoring the students’ themes, languages, conditions, and diverse cultures. (p. 23)

In classrooms, where the teacher clutches all the power and the students are taught to be passive, students feel negative about their educations and their schools. They feel held captive in school. Their cultures and languages are not valued by their schools. Negativity permeates the school.

On the other hand, when students are more active in schools, there are more positive results. According to Shor (1992), “In a participatory classroom where authority is mutual, some of the positive affects which support student learning include cooperativeness, curiosity, humor, hope, responsibility, respect, attentiveness, openness, and concern about society” (p. 24). Positivity arises in the participatory classroom. Learning is freer and more exciting and that leads to more learning. Most people would rather be in a participatory classroom, where positive
emotions abound. For Shor, the authority should be shared between the students and the teacher. It should not solely belong to one party over the other. Students want to learn in a participatory classroom, and they want to help each other. For Shor, the way to create a participatory classroom is simple: “To help move students away from passivity and cynicism, a powerful signal has to be sent from the very start, a signal that learning is participatory, involving humor, hope, and curiosity” (Shor, 1992, p. 26). Humor, hope, and curiosity are all wonderful emotions to have in a classroom. Students in such classrooms enjoy learning, feel empowered, and excel.

Different educators had theories on how to make a liberal education or classical education more active for students. Roth (2015) believed that “one of the crucial tasks of liberal education should be to help students cultivate the willingness and ability to learn from material they might otherwise reject or ignore” (p. 184). Liberally educated students need to be open to new ideas even if they come from unlikely sources. Roth placed this burden on educators and academic communities. Roth (2015) wrote, “Creating a culture that values the desire to learn from unexpected and uncomfortable sources as much as it values the critical faculties would be an important contribution to our academic and civic life” (p. 184). We do not want to be uncomfortable in our learning, but we must step out of our comfort zones in order to learn freely and to participate in that education that “liberates.”

Nussbaum believed that even though there should not be a single canon of “great books,” the arguments contained in classic books were important for students to wrestle with. According to Nussbaum (1997):

Literacy, including cultural literacy, confers both strength and independence, if viewed as a kind of essential training and nourishment, not as itself the goal. Working through the arguments contained in great books can make the mind more subtle, more rigorous, more active. (p. 35)

Students should not passively memorize “Great Books,” instead they should reflect on the messages that are contained in them. They should reason through the arguments to become more
intelligent. Just reading classics to check them off a list was not the end goal. Students needed to reflect upon them. Nussbaum also believed that students should search for their own meaning. According to Nussbaum (1997), “we live in a messy, puzzling, and complicated world, in which there is absolutely no substitute for one’s own active searching” (p. 35). If a student is told everything that he/she is supposed to know, then that student will not be fully prepared for life. Students need to discover meanings on their own. By actively searching, students stimulate their learning.

Critics of classical education often disparage classical education for the following reasons: They believe that it is not suited for all learners, they think that the curriculum is too elitist or alienating, and they feel that it creates passive not active learners. Classical education may not be suited for all learners. Some students might benefit from another form of education. Also, classical education does leave out important people and ideas. Students might not see themselves represented in the cultures talked about in classical education. Finally, if teachers shove information down the throats of learners in a classical educational setting, that would create passive learners rather than active learners. In this next section, I will conclude this chapter by reflecting on how educators could improve classical education.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined what classical education was in the past and what the contemporary model of classical education looks like. Currently, classical education emphasizes reading primary sources, teachers guiding student learning by bringing in important information while connecting it with prior knowledge and embracing the humanities. Classical education scholars advocate for classical education because they argue that classical education broadens students’ outlook on life and prepares students well for any future. Critics of classical education criticize it for its narrow scope and alienating nature. While it is true that classical education has some disadvantages, could educators combat those drawbacks?
I agree with Ira Shor that students need a participatory, empowering education. Students could still learn about classical educational topics, but educators could teach them in a way that creates a space for students to empower themselves. Teachers could invite students to bring their outside knowledge into the classroom. Students naturally make connections with their own lives and what they learn in school. Teachers need to capitalize on those student-led connections.

Another step that educators could take is to include more voices in the curriculum. Students should not just read “classics,” but they should read diverse voices. One way that students could be empowered in the curriculum is by helping pick the voices that they hear in the classroom. Who are the new authors that students need to read? Students can introduce their teachers to those authors. Also, when we choose the classics that students study, we need to ask ourselves, “Whose classics are we drawing from?” By studying the classics of Africans and Asians, students would still be learning a classical education, but one that is more diverse than the common classical education.

By making these changes to the classical curriculum, teachers can create a more empowering, liberating education for students. The classroom will be more joyful. Students will feel more valued. They will know that their lived experiences are valid and that their teachers appreciate the knowledge that the students bring to the classroom. This form of classical education will open the windows of the world for students from every background.
CHAPTER 3

EDUCATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left.

-Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me

In this chapter, I will examine the education of African American students. As a teacher at a predominantly African American school, I know that this is an important topic for me to study. I admit that I have much to learn. Growing up I attended mainly suburban public schools, where most of the students were White. As I got older, I took classes in the gifted track and nearly all my classmates were White or Asian. Only a couple students in my classes were Black. I attended the University of Georgia, where most of my classmates were White. Now I am part of a predominantly White faculty teaching predominantly Black students. I start this chapter aware of my ignorance. I also know that I have misconceptions about Black students and their educations. As I research and reflect, I will get a clearer picture of the education of Black people.

One of the misconceptions that many educators have is believing that Black students do not care about their education. When I teach my African American students, I must remember that they come from a long heritage of educational excellence. After the Emancipation Proclamation, Blacks sought education. Anderson (1988) wrote that the former slaves “viewed literacy and formal education as means to liberation and freedom” (p. 17). Laws made it illegal for enslaved people to become educated, so reading became a practice of freedom. Even during slavery, many slaves surreptitiously learned how to read because they equated reading with freedom. Anderson (1988) wrote, “The former slaves’ fundamental belief in the value of literate culture was expressed most clearly in their efforts to secure schooling for themselves and their children” (p. 5). The newly freed people knew that learning was important and sought it out for their children and themselves. This importance of education has traditionally been upheld by the Black community for many generations, however, over time, a shift occurred. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2013) write of hearing the:
honest queries of African-American adults who were raised in the South and who remember the reverence for intellectual achievement, the special status attached to being smart, to knowing a lot, scratch their heads and ask, ‘how did it happen that what was so valued by us throughout our history and in our immediate past has become associated with being white?’ (p. 36)

In some circles, people might accuse an intellectual, Black student of trying to act White. Some Black students might refrain from showing their intelligence in class because they do not want to be perceived as different from their peers. Some teachers might not recognize Black students as smart because their intelligence differs from the teachers’ expectations.

In this chapter, we will explore the field of African American education. What are the roots of Black education in the United States? What are some effective strategies to use with African American students? In this chapter, I borrow Carter G. Woodson’s (1933/2018) term, “miseducation” to describe the ways that schools have failed African American students. We will discuss the miseducation of Black students in the United States and then we will examine the miseducation of Black students in urban schools. We will end by looking at different aspects of African American education.

Miseducation of Black Students in the United States

In this section, I will discuss the miseducation of Black students in the United States. I draw upon the work of such scholars as James D. Anderson, Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, Asa G. Hilliard, III, William H. Watkins, bell hooks, and Vanessa Siddle Walker. Even during slavery when it was illegal to learn, many slaves sought education. Anderson (1988) wrote, “During the three decades before the Civil War slaves lived in a society in which for them literacy was forbidden by law and symbolized as a skill that contradicted the status of slaves” (p. 16). Slaves were not allowed to read and write. According to Anderson (1988), “Despite the dangers and difficulties, thousands of slaves learned to read and write. By 1860 about 5 percent of the slaves had learned to read” (p. 16). Even though it was illegal, some slaves learned to read and write.
After the Emancipation Proclamation, many newly freed men and women sought out the education that had been denied to them during slavery. Anderson (1988) wrote, “Blacks emerged from slavery with a strong belief in the desirability of learning to read and write” (p. 5). They had been denied literacy, and they equated literacy with freedom. According to Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003):

> Reading, being literate, getting an education in the Black collective consciousness are all acts that affirm one as a human, as a person of worth, as somebody, as a freeman or woman, one who is the opposite of a slave. (p. 44)

For so many years, the only people, who could read and write, were free people and not slaves. Once the former slaves became free, they grabbed hold of their right to read and write. It was their human right. It was a right that they wanted to control. According to Anderson (1988), “many ex-slaves had established their own educational collectives and associations, staffed schools entirely with black teachers, and were unwilling to allow their educational movement to be controlled by the ‘civilized’ Yankees” (p. 6). They wanted education so fervently that they created their own schools, and although they accepted the help of northern missionary teachers, they did not want to be dominated or led by them.

In addition to running their own schools, the newly freed slaves fought for public education for all. Anderson (1988) wrote, “Former slaves were the first among native southerners . . . to campaign for universal, state-supported public education” (p. 4). Up until that point, many southerners were satisfied with privately supported schools, educating few students, but southern Blacks demanded that the state provide education for all children.

With this new program of universal education for all, especially Black students, the debate became what kind of education was best for the Black students. At the time, most schools were classical in model, which suited many Black students perfectly well. Anderson (1988) wrote that Blacks “saw [classical liberal] curriculum as providing access to the best intellectual traditions of their era and the best means to understanding their own historical development and
When the White, southern elites were educating their children in the classical model, Blacks decided that their children could benefit from it as well. The classical model did not make them feel inferior. In fact, they felt the opposite. Anderson (1988) wrote, “For example, Richard Wright, one of the brightest and most influential educators of the post-Reconstruction era, found in his study of the classics solid evidence to counter claims of black inferiority” (p. 29). Wright could use his knowledge of the classics to dispute any assertions that he was lesser. He found justification of the excellence of Black people in the classics. According to Anderson (1988):

For such educators as Wright, the classical course was not so much the imposition of an alien white culture that would make blacks feel inferior as it was a means to understanding the development of the Western world and blacks’ inherent rights to equality within that world. (p. 30)

The classical education enabled Blacks to comprehend the Western world and see their right to equality. The classical course proved Blacks’ equality to Whites. Watkins (2017) writes that the Black liberal curriculum “was designed to develop the students’ analytical and critical faculties, and to help students become worldly, tolerant, and capable of significant societal participation” (Watkins, 2017, p. 725). This curriculum would prepare Black students to become critical thinkers and leaders and participate fully in the larger American society.

With the idea that literacy and education would bring freedom to African Americans, the purpose of Black education was two-fold. According to Anderson (1988):

The short-range purpose of black schooling was to provide the masses of ex-slaves with basic literacy skills plus the rudiments of citizenship training for participation in a democratic society. The long-range purpose was the intellectual and moral development of a responsible leadership class that would organize the masses and lead them to freedom and equality. (p. 31)
Education not only had to create literate citizens prepared for democracy but also had to create a group of Black leaders to help all Blacks achieve freedom and equality. This notion of a responsible leadership class ties in with Du Bois’s notion of the talented tenth. In Foner’s edited book of speeches by Du Bois, he stated:

The history of civilization seems to prove that no group or nation which seeks advancement and true development can despise or neglect the power of well-trained minds; and this power of intellectual leadership must be given to the talented tenth among American Negroes before this race can seriously be asked to assume the responsibility of dispelling its own ignorance. (Foner, 1970, p. 133)

Du Bois believed that the advancement of African Americans depended on the efforts of the talented tenth. He also believed that the talented tenth needed a critical and well-developed education. According to Du Bois, the best way to train the leadership class was through a liberal education. Booker T. Washington thought differently. He believed that the best education for Blacks in the South was a technical or industrial education. Anderson (1988) wrote, “Washington fully embraced Armstrong’s philosophy of racial progress, which urged Afro-Americans to remain in the South and seek their fortune, primarily in common agricultural and domestic labor” (p. 102). Washington believed that Blacks could advance through technical training and did not need a liberal education.

Much of the support for industrial education for Blacks in the South came from White southern industrialists. According to Anderson (1988), the new industrial curriculum “offered the possibility of adapting black education to the particular needs and interests of the South’s dominant-class whites” (p. 31). Blacks could be educated to be workers in the factories run by the White industrialists. One of the leading White industrialists and proponents for industrial education was Samuel Chapman Armstrong. He supported industrial education because he saw it as upholding the “correct” social order in the South. Anderson (1988) wrote, “Most important, however, Armstrong viewed industrial education primarily as an ideological force that would
provide instruction suitable for adjusting blacks to a subordinate social role in the emergent New South” (pp. 35-36). He believed that industrial education would keep Blacks in their rightful places, out of leadership roles. In fact, he eschewed classical education in the industrial schools that he founded because “he believed that such training stimulated ‘vanity’ in black students, which propelled them toward high-flown notions of politics and professional life” (Anderson, 1988, p. 49). Since he did not think that Blacks should hold leadership roles over Whites, he did not support classical education, which would give Blacks ideas above their supposed station. Armstrong was not alone in his belief of the supreme suitability of industrial education for Blacks. This notion got support from many quarters. According to Watkins (2001):

“Scientific” racism was a fundamental precept in the architecture of Black education. It was felt that the naturally inferior Black must always occupy a socially subservient position. Industrial education, therefore, was right for the Blacks, and they for it. More significant, industrial education was presented as progressive reform. (p. 40)

“Science” at that time backed up the racist ideas of the industrialists. They believed that Black people were racially inferior to White people and suited an industrial education. Many Blacks bought into this form of education because although it only prepared them for inferior roles in society, at least it was some form of education. According to Watkins (2001):

Education was always at, or near, the top of the freedom list for Blacks. Offering even humble educational opportunities would provide a history-making initiative. Black education thus became the central political weapon by which Blacks would be introduced and inducted into America’s social organization. (p. 181)

As a political tool, White industrialists used education to keep Blacks subordinate. The White industrialists advocated industrial education for Blacks and classical education for Whites, even though Blacks and some Whites would end up working together on the factory floors. However, the White worker could feel privileged in their race even if their social position did not improve with education. Brown (2003/2011) writes, “The advocacy and financial support of the
‘architects’ for an industrial education for blacks and classical liberal education for whites afforded marginal material and psychological privilege to white worker (i.e., racial privilege would compensate for their social class disadvantage)” (pp. 141-142). The white working class could take refuge in the “fact” that even though they were poorer than the White capitalist owners, at least they were White and not Black like some of their fellow workers. Watkins (2017) writes, “Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Black education was the resulting combination of a ‘slave aristocracy,’ self-effort, religious altruism, and the involvement of benevolent Whites” (p. 221). Altruistic Whites funded and taught in Black schools. Many did so out of a sense of religious duty. Blacks also sought to educate their own people. Often the education was basic. Watkins (2017) writes, “Curriculum was shaped by the necessity of survival, and thus took the form of basic education to prepare individuals for human interaction” (p. 221). To survive, Blacks needed some form of education, and many people could only get a basic one.

However, not all the schools only offered a basic curriculum. Talking about Jim Crow schools in the South, Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) write:

When the system wanted and expected the school and its teachers to provide a vocational education, the teachers did this and more. They taught the classics, higher-level math, and whatever they thought was part of what it meant to be educated for first-class citizenship.

(PP. 29-30)

Educators in the Jim Crow schools in the South believed that education would help determine a student’s future and the educators sought to prepare their students for the best futures possible. They taught as many subjects as they could. They embraced more advanced subjects because they reasoned that the advanced subjects would help Black people to be even more successful.

bell hooks wrote about her own experiences in segregated schools in the South. hooks (1994) wrote, “Attending school then was sheer joy. I loved being a student. I loved learning. School was the place of ecstasy—pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure” (P. 3). Even though her school lacked resources that the more affluent, White schools
possessed, hooks loved her education because her teachers were passionate and believed that education could make a Black person freer.

In Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South, Vanessa Siddle Walker wrote about Caswell County Training School, which was a Black school in the South. Walker (1996) wrote that African American educators in this school “forged a system of schooling that emphasized the importance of teacher/student relationships, valued activities as a key means of developing the students’ many talents, and believed in the children’s ability to learn and their own ability to teach” (p. 200). At that school, the teachers invested in their rapport with students. They coordinated plays, concerts, fairs, sporting events, and many other activities so that students could express themselves and find their interests. They also knew that their students could learn and that they could teach them. According to Walker (1996):

It is true that [segregated] schools were often treated unjustly and victimized by poor resources. But in spite of the legalized oppression, many teachers and principals created environments of teaching and learning that motivated students to excel. They countered the larger societal messages, which devalued African Americans, and reframed those messages to make African American children believe in their ability to achieve. (p. 219)

The segregated schools were safe havens for Black students, where they learned that they could and would excel. The world devalued them, and the school community uplifted them.

With integration came the promise of equal resources, however, that belief that Black students would achieve often disappeared. bell hooks experienced this firsthand. She wrote:

School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in all-black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. (hooks, 1994, p. 3)

Knowledge became sterile in schools. hooks’ teachers did not believe that she could excel. They did not push her to transform her life through education. hooks (1994) wrote, “We soon learned
that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us” (p. 3). Black students learned that they needed to be compliant not passionate. In the book, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates reflects on his experiences as a boy in school. Even when Coates was a boy, he was taught to work, not think for himself. He writes, “I was a curious boy, but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance” (Coates, 2015, p. 26).

Like hooks, Coates was taught to obey and to be compliant. His teachers did not encourage his curiosity.

Even during the time of slavery, Black people embraced the importance of education. They equated education and literacy with freedom. After the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans sought schooling with a fervor. They also pushed for universal schooling for all children. Many Blacks believed that all knowledge was important for them to become well-rounded citizens and they did not shy away for a classical curriculum. They saw examples of Black excellence in classical curricula. During the time of official segregation, some Black schools became a place where caring principals and educators would teach Black students that they could achieve and thrive. Society might tell them that because of the color of the skin, they were worthless, but at school, their teachers declared to them that they were smart, capable and gifted. One of the drawbacks during segregation was that Black schools received less funding than White schools. Once schools were integrated, the funding was officially said to be more equal. However, Jean Anyon, Jonathan Kozol and many others would argue that funding disparities still exist between predominantly Black schools and predominantly White schools.

Also, instead of Black students being told that they could achieve anything, many were told that they needed to be compliant and listen. Instead of education being a liberating experience, it was becoming an imprisoning experience for many Black students.

### Miseducation of Black Students in Urban Schools

Black students experienced much miseducation in urban schools. My school is an urban one, so to understand the experiences of my students and others like them, I need to examine the
state of urban schools. If my students lived in a rural area, then their experiences would be different. Since they live in an urban area, there are lessons I can learn from studying urban schools that will help me to educate my students better. Urban schools have many procedures that go back to the industrial era. Students in urban schools are trained to be cogs in a machine. Students are also taught that they need to stay in school so that they stay out of trouble. Finally, many educators are White and White teachers can subconsciously bring ideas of White dominance into the classroom. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the issues that may arise when White teachers educate Black students.

Many of the societal messages from the industrial education era persist today. The antiquated notion of Blacks only being suitable for industrial education or training to become a worker still exists. Abu-Jamal and Hill (2012) write, “Too many of our children are merely trained to become cogs in a machine, to become alienated workers, to become beings acted upon rather than actively functioning as agents in the world” (p. 108). Black children are taught to be passive and to be used by others. As hooks and Coates wrote in the previous section, Black students are taught to be obedient and compliant.

In the article, “Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work,” Jean Anyon (1980) conducted a small study, in which she observed five elementary schools. Anyon noticed that the curriculum at each school perpetuated the social class of its students. At the working-class schools, teachers taught the students to comply and not to question why. At the affluent, professional school, teachers taught the students to be creative. At the executive elite school, teachers taught the students to lead. The students were learning the skills that would keep them in their current social class. Since the study was small with only five schools, Anyon suggested that larger-scale research needed to be done to see if her results were consistent with most schools. However, I suspect that her results would be consistent in a larger study. Anyon, Abu-Jamal and Hill all found that Black and working-class students were taught to follow orders and they were not taught to think for themselves.
Even though Black students are taught to be compliant and obedient in schools, Black communities still present schools to students to stay out of trouble. Coates (2015) writes:

When our elders presented school to us, they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing. Fully 60 percent of all young black men who drop out of high school will go to jail. This should disgrace the country. But it does not . . . (pp. 26-27)

Elders in the community tell Black students that schooling is their way to stay out of trouble, but they do not tell them that they should go to school to learn and excel. The statistic that Coates quotes is troubling, yet he stresses that the country does not care about that. They do not care that such high of a percentage of Black men, who drop out of high school, go on to become imprisoned.

Culture and Curriculum

One of the issues that African American students have with schooling is that they are expected to leave their cultures outside of the classroom. Christopher Emdin (2016) uses the term, “neoindigenous” to describe students in urban schools and he writes:

In urban schools, where the neoindigenous are taught to be docile and complicit in their own miseducation and then celebrated for being everything but who they are, they learn quickly that they are expected to divorce themselves from their culture in order to be academically successful. (Emdin, 2016, p. 13)

Schools communicate to African American students that they can be successful if they leave their culture behind. Emdin writes that urban youth are trained to take part in destroying their own education. They are praised for being submissive and compliant. Schools contain a curriculum that does not relate to their lives and procedures that rob students of their culture. Emdin (2016) writes, “Urban youth who enter schools seeing themselves as smart and capable are confronted by curriculum that is blind to their realities and school rules that seek to erase their culture” (p. 13). What is tragic is that urban youth enter school with a tremendous confidence in their own
intelligence and abilities and schooling gets rid of those beliefs. Schooling teaches them that their culture is wrong, and their realities are not important. Shujaa (1994) wrote, “For African-Americans, individual success in schooling is often simply a matter of demonstrating one’s ability to represent the interests of the European-American elite” (p. 10). African American students must mimic the culture of White students or must “stay in their place” and not compete with the White elite. In either case, they are not allowed to celebrate their own culture.

Janice Hale also questioned why African American students had less academic success, and she hypothesized, “Perhaps African American children are not as successful in school because they are more intolerant of monotonous, boring tasks and the sterile, unstimulating school environment” (Hale, 1994, pp. 203-204). Schooling can be boring, and Hale believed that African American students could learn better if they were taught using African cultural norms. One observation that she made was “African Americans transform every cultural mode—language, music, religion, art, dance, problem solving, sports, writing—with a kind of ‘soulfulness’” (Hale, 1994, p. 202). An educator could create opportunities for African American students to add soul and parts of their personality into their assignments. Students could make their work unique to their inner selves.

Moreover, Hale (1994) found, “Performance also permeates African American expressive style. African American children learn at an early age how to perfect performer roles” (Hale, 1994, p. 202). Teachers should allow African American students to present their work. Schools should include courses in the arts, which will give African American students and other students opportunities to showcase their performing talents. Hale also believed that there was a specific African American teaching style, that teachers from every background could learn:

If it is plausible that there is an African American preaching style, then it is equally plausible that there could be an African American teaching style, which would connect with the culture of African American children, inspire them, motivate them, and capture their imagination. (Hale, 1994, p. 204)
Teachers could learn the teaching style that would motivate African American children. This teaching style would click with African American culture and would create a classroom, in which African American students could learn effectively.

Lisa Delpit also believed in connecting the curriculum to African American students. According to Delpit (2012):

[African American students] must be helped to overcome the negative stereotypes about themselves and their communities that permeate our culture. We can and must build curricula that connect to our students’ interests, thereby allowing them to connect the knowns to the unknowns. We cannot allow an expectation gap to result in an achievement gap. (p. 25)

African American students face negative stereotypes about themselves, their families, and their communities. Teachers need to help them to surmount those stereotypes. Delpit wrote that we can do this by connecting what students are learning to their interests and their culture. As I wrote in Chapter 2, students need prior knowledge to learn new information. What they are learning needs to connect to what they knew previously. In Robert Moses’s 2001 book, Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project, which he co-wrote with Charles E. Cobb, Jr., Moses found that his students learned algebra better when he connected it to their real lives. Moses and Cobb (2001) wrote, “Because of this connection with real life, the transition curriculum is not only experiential, but culturally based. The experiences must be meaningful in terms of the daily life and culture of the students” (p. 120). The curriculum needs to connect to the lives of the students in meaningful ways. It must make sense in their worlds.

Other authors propose that African American students and adults need to turn to African culture to succeed. Carruthers (1994) wrote, “If we are to save the African race, we Black intellectuals (a term that operationally has included all educated Blacks) must, at the very least, Africanize ourselves” (p. 51). Carruthers believed that African American could not turn to White
culture to succeed. Instead, they needed to embrace African culture. Lee also believed that African culture could save African American students. According to Lee (1994):

An African-centered pedagogy is needed to support a line of resistance to the imposition of Eurocentric biases. It is needed to produce an education that contributes to achieving pride, equity, power, wealth, and cultural continuity for Africans in America and elsewhere. (p. 296)

African American students are often taught that they need to conform to White, middle-class norms to succeed in school or the workplace. Instead, Lee called for educators of African American students to use an African-centered pedagogy. With an African-centered pedagogy, African American students would learn to embrace being African American. They would take pride in their culture. They would be empowered. They would become more in-tune with their culture.

High Expectations

Another aspect of teaching African American students is that teachers believe that African American students can achieve, and they encourage their students in academic success. As Tatum (2005) wrote, “a culturally responsive approach to literacy teaching gives explicit attention to academic excellence as well as cultural competence” (p. 78). African American students are taught that they can succeed, and they can become adept in their culture. According to Tatum (2005):

A culturally responsive approach to literacy teaching expands what students are exposed to, and challenges teachers to do whatever is in their power to help students embrace high expectations for themselves and to help them reach those expectations despite what others outside the classroom—parents, siblings, peers, other teachers and administrators, a racist society—might expect of them. (p. 78)

African American students often have naysayers in their lives. The larger society might not believe that African American students are capable of academic success. Out of pity, principals and teachers might lower their expectations for African American students. Adults in their lives
might not expect for them to do well in school because school had been a place of failure for the adults. Tatum called teachers to help students believe and achieve.

Steele also wrote about educators having high expectations for students. He argued that African American students are often under “stereotype threat,” which is “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele, 2003, p. 111). African American students feel a tremendous pressure to keep from portraying their race in a negative light. According to Steele (2003):

High standards, at least in a relative sense, should be an inherent part of teaching, and critical feedback should be given in the belief that the recipient can reach those standards. . . . they have to be made explicit for students under stereotype threat. . . . when they are made explicit, the students trust and respond to criticism. (p. 126)

Steele argued that teachers should have high expectations for all students, but students under stereotype threat, such as African Americans, should be told unequivocally that they can reach those standards. Teachers need to give constructive feedback that will help African American students meet those expectations. Steele promised that once teachers made those high expectations, told their African American students that they knew that they could reach the standards, and gave them the feedback to do so, African American students acted on the criticism. Trust, encouragement, and explicit, constructive feedback need to accompany high expectations for African American students.

Black Boys in School

Black boys and girls often have different experiences in school. In this section, I will focus on educating African American boys specifically. Of course, not all African American boys fit into the same mold. However, many African American boys would benefit from some changes in their schooling practices. The first step is to realize that many African American boys care about learning. As Tatum (2009) wrote, “We must get rid of the notion that African American
boys do not want to be educated” (p. xv). A teacher might think that his/her African American male students do want to learn because of their behavior, but that is not always the case. However, many teachers and schools operate out of this mindset. Tatum wrote that he knew that teachers felt this way because they chose “such instructional practices as exposing these young boys to fewer texts or requiring them to read texts that have nothing to do with empowering them or helping them navigate school and society” (Tatum, 2009, p. xv). Teachers would lower their expectations for African American male students because they believed that the students did not want to learn. Tatum argued that teachers needed to expose students to more texts and find texts that would help the boys become empowered and learn how to find their way through school and society.

Teachers also need to understand the struggles that African American young men go through. That understanding needs to guide their instruction. According to Tatum (2005):

Literacy instruction must be planned with a complete understanding of the turmoil experienced by black males. The presence of turmoil in the lives of black male students, their reaction to it, and institutional reactions have implications for pedagogical practices, classroom interactions, and curriculum orientations. (p. 34)

Black males face many struggles in society. They experience instability at home, in public, and at school. When Black males react to the turmoil at school, they are often punished severely. Teachers need to be aware of the turmoil that their Black male students experience and work to help them face the turmoil and heal from it. Teachers can find relevant texts, which students can read and realize that they are not the only ones to experience turbulence in daily lives.

To combat the turmoil in their lives, African American male students often need school to be a caring environment. Polite wrote about a study in which the African American male high school students “did demonstrate that they respected and positively responded to those teachers who, in their opinions, were caring, fair, and firm in their approach to students and education” (Polite, 1994, p. 200). To teach African American male students well, teachers should be caring,
consistent, and fair. I have found this to be true in my own teaching. My African American male students seem to respond well to my caring personality. They also will call out any unfairness in my interactions with them. If I seem to be picking on one of them, they are sure to let me know. I must make sure that I am consistent in my classroom management.

By being caring, firm, and fair, teachers help to create a learning environment that benefits African American male students. According to Noguera (2008):

> There is no doubt that if schools were to become more nurturing and supportive, students would be more likely to perceive schools as a source of help and opportunity rather than an inhospitable place that one should seek to escape and actively avoid. Changing the culture and structure of schools such that African American male students come to regard them as sources of support for their aspirations and identities will undoubtedly be the most important step that can be taken to make high levels of academic achievement the norm rather than the exception. (p. 42)

Schools that are caring and supportive are critical for African American males. They need to believe that their teachers can help them succeed, and they need to feel secure in their Black identities. Then, Black male students will be empowered to achieve.

**Black Girls in School**

Like Black males, Black females face struggles in school. They can be misunderstood or feared by their teachers. They can also be left to flounder in schools. According to Morris (2016), “One of the most persistent and salient traits among girls who have been labeled ‘delinquent’ is that they have failed to establish a meaningful and sustainable connection with schools” (p. 2). When a student does not feel connected in the classroom, then she could act out and then be labeled as “delinquent.”

Another problem that African American female students face is that their teachers might not believe that they can achieve. Morris (2016) writes, “Black girls in classrooms across the country have been granted permission to fail by the implicit biases of teachers that lower
expectations for them” (p. 50). Teachers allow Black female students to fail because they lower their standards for them. Instead, teachers need to believe that Black females can achieve and raise their expectations for them.

Teachers also need to cultivate their rapport with their Black female students. As Morris (2016) writes, “The student-teacher relationship is a critical component of whether a girl’s comments will be seen as part of her expression and learning, or as a deliberate and willful affront to the teacher’s authority” (p. 63). Teachers often complain that Black female students talk back or are disrespectful to them. However, if a teacher has a strong student-teacher relationship with the Black female student, then the teacher will be more likely to listen to what the student has to say rather than immediately reacting to it. The teacher will probably interpret the comments in a more positive light.

To be successful in school, Black girls need understanding teachers, administrators, and school policies. According to Morris (2016):

Black girls need teachers, administrators, and school policies that do not see their Black identity as inferior or something to fear. Their Black femininity must not be exploited, ignored, and punished. Their words must not be seen as problematic, and their questions need not be seen as inherently defiant. (p. 178)

Schools need to be safe havens for Black female students. They need their Blackness to be celebrated and respected, not feared. They need caring teachers, who will listen to them and not think that they are being disrespectful when they talk in the classroom.

White Teachers and Black Students

For educators like Howard, the step towards better schools and a better country is met by White teachers facing their own dominance. Howard (2016) writes, “We cannot help our students overcome the negative repercussions of past and present racial dominance if we have not unraveled the remnants of White dominance that still linger in our minds, hearts, and habits” (p. 9). Many White educators do not realize that they hold notions of White dominance. They do not
realize that they think themselves better or smarter than others because they are White. According to Howard (2016), “Dominant groups tend to claim truth as their private domain. .. As Whites, we usually don’t even think of ourselves as having culture; we’re simply ‘right’” (p. 57). In 2015-2016, 80 percent of U. S. educators were White (U.S. Department of Education, 2017) and oftentimes they taught students, who were not White. As White educators, they often do not even realize that their dominant perspective differs from the perspective of their students. White educators must realize that their perspective is not always right or the only correct one. According to Howard (2016):

The luxury of ignorance, the assumption of rightness, and the legacy of privilege have for centuries functioned together to support and legitimize White dominance. The interaction of these three dynamics has formed what I call the “dominance paradigm,” a pervasive and persistent worldview wherein White assumptions are held to be true and right, White ignorance of other groups is the norm, and White privilege flourishes essentially unchallenged and unacknowledged. (p. 69)

White educators do not realize their own perspectives are not necessarily right or that they are privileged in any way. They do not realize that they are ignorant of other groups, or if they realize that they are ignorant, often they do not work to fix that ignorance.

For teachers to see the perspectives of their students and fix their ignorance, they must learn to be empathetic. Howard (2016) writes, “Empathy requires the suspension of assumptions, the letting go of ego, and the release of the privilege of nonengagement. .. It requires all of our senses and focuses our attention on the perspective and worldview of another person” (p. 79). We need to let go of our assumptions and egos. We need to engage with our students and see the world and the classroom from their perspective. We can learn so much from doing so. Howard (2016) writes, “It is important for us as White educators to realize that many of our students of color have these feelings [of not being comfortable, a subtle threat] much of the time in the classroom” (p. 79). I can think of my classroom as a safe place, but my Black students might still
feel threatened and not comfortable. What can I do to make the classroom less threatening for them? How can I let go of any notions of White dominance? How can I realize when I am wrong, and my students are right?

Urban schools are still a place where students hear the message, “Sit down. Listen. Don’t talk. Don’t question. Just behave.” Students are taught to be compliant. They are told that school will keep them out of trouble, but schools are not a liberating place for them. Also, most teachers are White and White teachers often operate out of a notion of White dominance. White educators need to examine their own thinking and root out any misguided ideas of White superiority. They need to develop true empathy for their students and realize when their students are right.

Love and Social Justice

To close this chapter, I will discuss two guiding principles that greatly benefit the education of African American students: love and social justice. Love permeates the most liberating classrooms. As Schubert (2009) wrote, “It is love that helps discover and cultivate positive capabilities of learners” (p. 132). When an educator operates with love, then he/she can find and grow the talents of his/her students. When my school was founded, love set it apart. The faculty was united in the love of learning and the love for our students. Our director demonstrated caring for the students through his interactions with them. When he left the school five years later, I felt like the heart of the school left with him.

Love is also vital because it lays the best foundation for social justice. Schubert (2009) wrote, “We have found that social justice is embedded in love wherein each person admires, respects, and grows from others” (p. 133). Social justice is wrapped up in love because you need love to respect another person. Social justice is fighting for the best for the marginalized. Without love, you would not fight for their best interests.

Social justice is one of the issues guiding researchers. According to He and Phillion (2008), “Researchers engaged in personal–passionate–participatory inquiry . . . have confronted issues of equity, equality, social justice, and societal change through both research and action”
This new breed of researchers fights for social justice through their research and actions.

Just like “personal–passionate–participatory” researchers, educators need to engage in social justice. According to Love (2019):

Pedagogy should work in tandem with students’ own knowledge of their community and grassroots organizations to push forward new ideas for social change, not just as a tool to enhance test scores or grades. Pedagogy, regardless of its name, is useless without teachers dedicated to challenging systemic oppression with intersectional social justice.

(p. 19)

Teachers need to work with students and the knowledge that they bring to the classroom to improve society. Educators need to fight against oppression. They need to work for social justice.

As I speculate on what a liberating, classical education could be for my Black students, I need to remember their educational heritage. For centuries, Black people have believed that education equals freedom. What steps can I take as a teacher to promote freedom in the educational journey of my students? There are many ways that teachers can teach to liberate or teach to oppress. I need to examine my own teaching practices and get rid of any unjust ones. When do I need to be quiet and learn from my students? When do I need to throw away my preconceived notions of what type of education is best for them and instead listen to what they have to say about their own educations? How can I create a space so that their education become liberating and empowering for them?
Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no one individual can embrace it.

_African Proverb_

As I started reading for this dissertation, there were four authors that I kept coming across. I saw how a classical education had prepared them for their careers. By studying the educations of these four Black people, who made a huge impact in American society, I will search for some common themes of a liberating education. How did their educations prepare them for their careers and the last impact that they would create? In this chapter, I will profile these prominent African Americans. I will discuss their educational journeys. I will examine their ideas about education and African Americans.

The first author I will profile is Marva Collins, who was an African American educator in Chicago. She rose to fame for reaching tremendous growth with African American kids. She firmly believed that every child could learn, and, with perseverance and love, she helped kids to grow several levels in reading in a single year. Her elementary students learned to love Shakespeare plays and discovered the phonics behind the words they read and wrote. Collins’ students received a whirlwind of publicity once people started finding out what they were learning. In the book, *Marva Collins’ Way*, Collins and Tamarkin (1990) wrote, “What pleased me the most about the publicity was having people see the kinds of knowledge my students were attaining, because it had become a common assumption that the liberal arts curriculum was beyond the capacity of black children” (p. 161). People were amazed at what knowledge her students could retain. In addition to instructing her students in the liberal arts, Collins encouraged each student every day and repeatedly told her class how brilliant they were and how much they knew. As I read about how Collins would lavishly compliment her students every day, I first thought that it was a little much. However, then I found myself doing the same and I noticed how my students would sit up a little straighter and take more pride in their academic work.
The second person I will profile is W. E. B. Du Bois, who was a renowned African American socialist. As a trailblazer, Du Bois paved the way for intelligent African Americans to attend colleges. He stressed the importance of educating Blacks in a variety of schools. While many prominent African Americans and Whites argued for industrial training for Blacks, Du Bois advocated for liberal education for some Blacks. Du Bois felt that Black people needed to develop talented leaders among themselves in order to advance the position of Blacks in society. Because of his passionate confidence in the excellence of Black people in the face of the racist Whites and conciliatory Blacks, who argued that Blacks needed to accept their lower lot in life, I enjoyed reading his work.

The third prominent African American that I will profile differs from the rest because he never worked as an educator. Although he never held the title of teacher, he taught both Blacks and Whites about the Black experience through his plays and poetry. August Wilson was a prolific playwright, who, among his other work, completed a century-long play cycle in which each play takes place during a different decade of the twentieth century and chronicles the Black experience in the United States for that decade.

The final person I will profile is Carter G. Woodson, who was a prominent African American, who sought to improve the confidence and knowledge of Blacks as a whole. I first came across him in his *Mis-education of the Negro*. Woodson believed that Black people needed to understand African history better in order to gain confidence and improve their own lives. He also created the National Negro Week, which became a huge hit for Blacks to celebrate other Blacks and themselves. Woodson was a renowned orator, who filled his speeches with African history. One day during a taxi ride on the way to a speech, Woodson spoke so compellingly to his companion that when the taxi pulled up to the venue, the taxi driver asked to go into the building with them, so that he could hear Woodson lecture (Goggin, 1993, p. 43). Woodson wrote with that same passion and eloquence. Without him, we might not honor Black history at all.
Marva Collins

Marva Collins rose to fame by being known as the miraculous super-teacher, who turned students’ lives around. In 1982 Civia Tamarkin wrote the book, *Marva Collins’ Way*, with Marva Collins, and in this book, Tamarkin writes about how the media focused on the fact that Collins was able to teach Shakespeare to seven-, eight- and nine-year-olds, but Tamarkin wanted to learn more about how Collins taught (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990).

Marva Collins was born on August 31, 1936 in Monroeville, Alabama. Of her own family, Collins writes that they were “always a family of doers and achievers” (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990, p. 32). Collins must have learned her can-do attitude from her relatives. As an educator, Collins emphasized that every child could learn and she criticized teachers, who gave up too early on kids. She advised teachers to consider “the children as the big YOUs, and the teachers as the little I” (Collins, 1992, p. 11; emphasis in original). Children were the most important people in the classroom and teachers needed to find a way to help every child succeed.

Even as a child, Collins loved to learn. Once Collins learned how to read, she read everything in sight. Collins and Tamarkin (1990) reflected:

Once I discovered how to sound out words, I tried reading everything I could get my hands on: labels on cans and boxes, the farmer’s almanac, newspapers, books of fairy tales and fables, and especially Grandma Annie Knight’s huge black-leather Bible. (p. 40)

As a child, I also remember wanting to read everything around me. This may be a universal experience for children learning to read. When my youngest sister was learning how to read, I remember her staring out the car window and asking, “What’s a buf-fit?” (With the hard ‘t’ on the end). She had seen the sign for a buffet restaurant and used her newly gained knowledge of reading to sound out the word as “buf-fit”. Like my little sister and me, Collins read everything around her, however, Collins kept reading everything around her, even past the initial stage of learning how to read. When Collins would visit someone’s house as a child, she recalls that she
would “disappear, rummaging through cabinets and shelves in search of books. A book was a
treasure, and [she] lost [herself] in every one [she] found” (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990, p. 41). At
night, Collins enjoyed reading newspaper articles, fables and poems to her father. Collins was
introduced to literature through the Bible stories that her grandmother told her. Collins
remembered her grandmother proudly reciting poems that she had memorized as a child. Collins
learned about William Shakespeare through her aunt Ruby, who had gone back to high school as
an adult. Her aunt lent her Macbeth, and, from that moment, Collins was fascinated by
Shakespearean plays (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990). These experiences of reading poetry,
Shakespeare, fables, and Bible stories would pave the way for Collins to share such writings with
her students.

Besides becoming a voracious reader, Collins, at an early age, decided that she was going
to college. Collins and Tamarkin (1990) wrote, “From the day I became aware of what college
was, I made up my mind I was going” (p. 45). Many of Collins’ relatives had not been to college,
so this was a big step for her family. Collins went to Clark College, an all-black liberal arts
college for girls in Atlanta. She got a business degree and then started teaching in a secretarial
course and later in the local elementary school. She said, “I had always been fascinated with
learning, with the process of discovering something new” (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990, p. 47;
emphasis in original). She enjoyed teaching her students because she could help her students
learn new information.

As she began teaching at the elementary school, she learned from her principal and her
students. From her first principal, she “learned that a good teacher knows the students, not just the
subject” (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990, p. 47). Her principal taught her to watch the faces of the
students to see if they were understanding her teaching. As Collins started watching the faces of
her second-grade students, she noticed that they became bored with the required second grade
reader, which was full of generic stories. Later in her teaching, Collins would argue against
generic primers, by saying:
It is senseless to hand children prepackaged, specially-designed reading material when there are so many relevant lessons to be plucked from the writings of great authors. But it takes a creative, hard-working teacher to ferret out those things, to focus on the content, not the mechanics of reading. (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990, p. 156)

Collins was that diligent teacher, and she searched out more engaging reading materials, which included *Aesop’s Fables, Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, Hans Christian Anderson, La Fontaine’s *Fables*, and Leo Tolstoy’s *Fables and Fairytales*. Collins rationalized her curriculum changes, by saying that these types of stories “teach values and morals and lessons about life. Fairy tales and fables allow children to put things in perspective—greed, trouble, happiness, meanness, and joy” (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990, p. 52). Such stories have timeless messages and students can relate to the big emotions in the stories. Collins believed that students did not need to read stories that were modern and about events that could happen in their own lives. Collins and Tamarkin (1990) wrote, “Children do not need to read stories that teach ‘street smarts.’ They learn enough on their own. What they need are character-building stories. They need to read for values, morality, and universal truths” (p. 156). Collins felt that students did not need to learn about staying safe on the streets because their everyday lives taught them such lessons. Instead, they needed to learn about morals and values.

Collins also believed that students should learn how to be independent and self-sufficient. Collins and Tamarkin (1990) wrote, “We have to teach children self-reliance and self-respect. We have to teach them the importance of learning, of developing skills, of doing for themselves” (p. 54). Collins taught children to believe in themselves and learn all they could so that they could support themselves.

After she had taught in her local elementary school for a couple years, Collins decided to move from her hometown to Chicago. She began working at Delano Elementary School in Chicago. The principal at Delano would lecture the teachers in the classics during faculty meetings. Collins did not know many of the classical references, so she started brushing up on the
classics. Inspired by that principal, Collins “began teaching poetry and classical literature to [her] students and learned that a good teacher is one who continues to learn along with the students” (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990, p. 55). Collins had several guidelines for a solid education: two of which were that students needed to read classic poetry and literature and teachers needed to keep learning.

After a while, Collins started standing out from her peers because she taught traditionally rather than progressively. Collins cautioned against an education that was too progressive, by saying, “In an effort to follow John Dewey’s notion of a student-centered rather than subject-centered approach to learning, schools have too often sacrificed subject matter, being more concerned with how they taught rather than what they taught” (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990, p. 131). Collins saw other educators teaching skills in a vacuum of content, and she believed that students were the victims in that educational shift. Collins taught using books and units, and she was able to teach skills that arose in the larger unit. Imagine two groups of students learning how to find the main idea. The first group does a single lesson focused on finding the main idea. In their worksheet, students read a story about farming, and they are given clues on how to find the main idea in the story. The second group studied a Shakespearean play for whole week. As they discussed the play with their classmates and teacher, one of the questions that they deliberated over was what the main idea of the play was. Probably with a subject as rich as a Shakespearean play, there were several main ideas thrown around and the students could debate which one fit the play the best. Collins advocated for the second method of education because she believed that the students would learn more in a content-rich environment. Frequently in teaching career, she argued against too progressive of a teaching model. According to Collins and Tamarkin (1990):

Dewey’s philosophy has been misconstrued, misapplied, and frequently seized upon as a convenient rationale for not teaching fundamental material. When parents and school boards have challenged the subject competency of teachers and accused schools of not
teaching basic skills, administrators and teaching theorists have rushed to the defence, claiming that ‘humanistic’ education is more important than knowledge. (pp. 131-132) Collins criticized humanistic education because she believed that teachers and administrators used it as justification for not teaching important information to students. Collins would argue that students needed to learn a wide world of knowledge to become successful citizens and leaders.

Collins had several pillars in her philosophy of education. Firstly, she believed that teachers needed a solid education of their own. According to Collins and Tamarkin (1990):

The best training a teacher can have is a solid liberal arts education. Instead of emphasizing methods courses, training institutions should require education majors to have a broad background in literature, science, art, music, and philosophy. The object of teaching is to impart as much knowledge as possible. Students can only give back what a teacher gives out. (p. 150)

Collins saw knowledge as being passed from the teacher to the students and then being used by the students. Some critics of a knowledge-centered curriculum, such as the one that Collins advocated, would probably argue that such a curriculum should not be taught. No matter how the content is chosen, somebody decides whose knowledge is important by including it in the curriculum and someone else’s knowledge is not important by leaving it out. Collins would probably argue that her students needed to learn how to navigate in the mainstream society, and by having as much knowledge as possible, they would be able to succeed better. Yes, Collins taught the classics to her students, but she also connected it with modern society. Teachers, who had a strong foundation in many content areas, would be able to share more knowledge with their students.

Secondly, Collins believed that teachers needed to learn voraciously. Collins and Tamarkin (1990) wrote, ‘I read constantly in order to tie together fragments of information and interweave subjects. . . . I read with an urgency so I could teach my students what they needed to
know” (p. 149). Collins read in order to gain the knowledge to teach her students what they, in her words, “needed to know” (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990, p. 149). Collins believed that her students needed a wide domain of knowledge and she had to educate herself to share it with them. Teachers of successful students keep learning themselves. Their need of knowledge is not over once they become teachers. On the contrary, they need to keep learning so that they can connect with their students and help them learn.

Also, she believed that students needed to learn classics and poetry. Collins (1992) advocated, “Let us once again return the teaching of the classics and poetry to our children” (p. 61). She shared the classics and poetry with her students because she believed that those works of literature contained many timeless messages that the modern student still needed to learn.

Moreover, she believed that students needed to be encouraged to read and to read beyond just the classics. Collins would scour the reviews of new children’s books and Collins and Tamarkin (1990) wrote that Collins “was always on the lookout for a new book to spark [her] children’s interest” (p. 149). Collins encouraged the love of reading in her students by connecting them with books that would engage them. She believed that her students needed to become good readers and she was responsible for helping them learn to love reading. Collins sparked the love of reading in many of her students.

Additionally, Marva Collins believed that positive reinforcement was the way to break through to students. She strongly felt that her students needed more cheerleaders to encourage them. Collins (1992) wrote, “We find something to say that is complimentary to every child. This is just as important as the curriculum” (p. 11). Collins would compliment her students frequently and tell them that they were the smartest class in the world. She connected with each child individually and encouraged them to do their best. She helped her students to see their mistakes as steppingstones on the path of learning and she believed in helping students correct their errors. Collins did not accept failing grades. Instead, she would help the student to fix their mistakes and learn how to keep from making them in the future.
Finally, Collins believed that different kinds of learning worked together. Even though Collins followed more of a knowledge-centered/teacher-centered approach, she still focused on connecting with her students. According to Collins and Tamarkin (1990):

If you teach the basics in a classical curriculum, you can still pay attention to a child’s feelings and attitudes. Moreover, it is a mistake to assume that in order to stimulate creativity and critical thinking you must rule out any learning by rote. Memorization is the only way to teach such things as phonics, grammar, spelling, and multiplication tables. (p. 132)

Collins connected with her students on an emotional level while teaching them using a classical approach. She also used a lot of memorization with her students because she believed that memorization was the most effective approach to learning certain topics, such as multiplication and phonics. She also helped her students to become creative, critical thinkers. They would write their own innovative essays inspired by class discussions.

Collins became an innovative educator by believing that her students could and would succeed, learning as much as she could so she could share her knowledge with them, and promoting a classics-filled curriculum that encompassed the modern world. She believed that her students needed a lot of knowledge and to be able to communicate effectively in order to succeed and she, as the teacher, needed to work tirelessly in order to make that happen. Collins changed the lives of many students by believing in them and teaching them how to read and think critically.

W. E. B. Du Bois

W. E. B. Du Bois was a trailblazing sociologist and author. He was born on February 23, 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts to an African American family with a strong history of schooling. While reflecting on his family, Du Bois (1968/2012) wrote, “For several generations my people had attended schools for longer or shorter periods so most of them could read and write. I was brought up from earliest years with the idea of regular attendance at school” (p. 12).
Du Bois was expected by his family to go to school regularly. Mary Silvina, his mother, raised him without the help of his father, and she expected for him to excel in school. In W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography 1868-1963, David Levering Lewis (2009) wrote:

[Mary Silvina’s] boy had the stamina of the best of her people and the quickness of the Du Boises, and it would have been in her nature to do all that she could to save him from a prosaic existence as one more upstanding, marginal, Great Barrington Burghardt. (p. 25)

Mary Silvina worked tirelessly to make sure that Du Bois was successful in school and would escape the mediocrity of Great Barrington. She moved them to a new house, so that he could attend a better school. Du Bois (1968/2012) wrote that at his school “the curriculum was simple: reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic; grammar, geography and history” (p. 12). Du Bois was one of the only African American students at his school. At first he did not notice any difference between the other children and himself, however, soon he began to wonder about why other children thought he was different from them. In his 1920 book, Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil, Du Bois (2004) wrote that “very gradually I found myself assuming quite placidly that I was different from the other children. At first I think I connected the difference with a manifest ability to get my lessons rather better than most” (p. 7). Du Bois did better academically than many of his peers and thought that his intellectual prowess might be the reason that other students regarded him as different. However, he soon learned that there was another reason. Du Bois (2004) wrote, “Then, slowly, I realized that some folks, a few, even several, actually considered my brown skin a misfortune; once or twice I became painfully aware that some human beings even thought it was a crime” (p. 7). This idea that people considered his blackness a crime would be a theme that Du Bois would return to in his writing.

After grade school, Du Bois matriculated into high school where his principal, Frank Hosmer “suggested, quite as a matter of fact, that [he] ought to take the college preparatory course which involved algebra, geometry, Latin and Greek” (Du Bois, 1968/2012, p. 15). Even
though Du Bois was at the top of his class, Hosmer was radical for his time in advising Du Bois to take the college preparatory course. Du Bois did that, and later he wrote, “I did not then realize that Hosmer was quietly opening college doors to me, for in those days they were barred with ancient tongues” (Du Bois, 1968/2012, p. 15). By studying Latin and Greek, Du Bois could get accepted into college.

After Du Bois became the “first one of the family who finished in the local high school” (Du Bois, 1968/2012, p. 114), he attended Fisk University in Tennessee. Du Bois (1968/2012) wrote that at Fisk for the first time in his life, “I was going to meet colored people of my own age and education, of my own ambitions. . . . I became aware, once a chance to go to a group of such people was opened up for me, of the spiritual isolation in which I was living” (p. 23). Growing up as the only Black student in his school, he did not know other ambitious, intelligent Black students. At Fisk, he met and befriended many talented, smart African Americans his age. Du Bois’s time at Fisk was one of awakening socially. In his 1938 speech, “A Pageant in Seven Decades,” Du Bois calls his three years at Fisk “years of growth, strength and expanding ambition” (Foner, 1970a, p. 27). These years prepared him for his years at Harvard, where he found his academic focus:

It was at Harvard that my education, turning from philosophy, centered in history and then gradually in economics and social problems. Today my course of study would have been called sociology; but in that day Harvard did not recognize any such science. I had taken in high school and at Fisk the old classical course with Latin and Greek, philosophy and some history. At Harvard I started in with philosophy and then turned toward United States history and social problems. (Du Bois, 1968/2012, p. 39)

His education before Harvard had been traditional and classical. While at Harvard, his educational focus shifted. Du Bois was drawn to what is now called sociology because he sought to understand and change the social and racial problems in the United States. Du Bois (1968/2012) wrote:
My attention from the first was focused on democracy and democratic development and upon the problem of the admission of my people into the freedom of democracy. This my school training touched but obliquely. We studied history and politics almost exclusively from the point of view of ancient German freedom, English and New England democracy, and the development of the United States. (p. 28)

Du Bois’s schooling did not cover the history and politics of Black people. Instead, his schooling focused on the history and politics of White New Englanders. Du Bois devoted his life to studying how his people fit into the idea of a democracy.

W. E. B. Du Bois had several habits that made him a devoted and dedicated scholar. Du Bois (1968/2012) reported of his time in school, “I spent a great deal of time in the library and did my assignments with thoroughness and with prevision of the kind of work I wanted to do later” (p. 38). He worked with precision and dedication, spending hours in the library, researching and writing.

Du Bois also had a focus that guided his scholarship. While he was in school, he encountered White people, who did not believe that Black people, like Du Bois, were equal to White people. Depending on the setting and the demographics of the classroom, the analysis differed. Du Bois (1968/2012) wrote:

In the elementary school it came only in the matter of geography when the races of the world were pictured: Indians, Negroes and Chinese, by their most uncivilized and bizarre representatives; the whites by some kindly and distinguished-looking philanthropist. In the elementary and high school, the matter was touched only incidentally, due I doubt not to the thoughtfulness of the teachers; and again my racial inferiority could not be dwelt upon because the single representative of the Negro race in the school did not happen to be in any way inferior to his fellows. (p. 97)

Du Bois encountered racist images of non-White races in his elementary school textbooks. Non-Whites were shown as being inferior and strange, while Whites were always pictured as civilized
and wealthy. In his early and secondary school education, his teachers did not dwell on the idea that Blacks were intellectually inferior because Du Bois, as the only Black student in the school, disproved that notion.

Moreover, at Fisk, a historically African American college, Du Bois met the idea that Blacks were in no way inferior to Whites. Du Bois (1968/2012) wrote, “At Fisk, the problem of race was faced openly and essential racial equality asserted and natural inferiority strenuously denied” (p. 97). Being at a Black university, Du Bois and his classmates saw plenty of evidence that Blacks were just as intellectually strong as Whites. They did not deny that there was a race problem in society. Instead, they discussed it and confirmed that people of different races were naturally equal.

However, at Harvard, Du Bois heard another message. Du Bois (1968/2012) wrote, “At Harvard, on the other hand, I began to face scientific race dogma . . . It was continually stressed in the community and in classes that there was a vast difference in the development of the whites and the ‘lower’ races” (p. 98). At Harvard, a university in which Du Bois was one of a few Blacks if not the only one, Du Bois heard the message that Blacks were developmentally inferior to Whites. According to the Harvard community, science backed this notion that Blacks were naturally inferior to Whites. Later in Germany, Du Bois faced the same message. At Harvard and in Germany, races were considered civilized if they had a culture and history. Du Bois (1968/2012) wrote, “Africa was left without culture and without history” (p. 98). The White leadership at Harvard and in the German universities did not think that Africa had a history or a culture. Du Bois recognized that Africa had a vibrant culture and a distinguished history. In his 1920 book, Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil, Du Bois (2004) wrote, “Europe has never produced and never will in our day bring forth a single human soul who cannot be matched and over-matched in every line of human endeavor by Asia and Africa” (p. 28). The Whites that Du Bois encountered believed that Europeans accomplished far more than Asians and Africans and Du Bois argued the opposite. He believed that Asians and Africans were just as talented and
developmentally strong as Europeans. In fact, many of their contributions were older than those of the Europeans and Europeans built on those contributions to advance. According to Du Bois (2004):

Why, then, is Europe great? Because of the foundations which the mighty past have furnished her to build upon: the iron trade of ancient, black Africa, the religion and empire-building of yellow Asia, the art and science of the “dago” Mediterranean shore, east, south, and west, as well as north. (p. 29)

Europeans achieved much because they created on what Asians and Africans had already done and the resources that Asians and Africans possessed. In fact, they took what Asia and Africa had to become a world leader. Then they did not give credit to Africa and Asia. Instead, they referred to Asians and Africans as developmentally inferior and denied that they had a culture or a history.

Before studying at Harvard and in Germany, Du Bois had not wrestled with the fact that many Whites viewed him and his people as racially inferior. Even when his professors and classmates were arguing that Blacks were scientifically proven to be inferior, Du Bois did not believe that their arguments were valid. According to Du Bois (1968/2012):

I knew . . . that in all things in general, white people were just the same as I: their physical possibilities, their mental processes were no different from mine; even the difference in skin color was vastly overemphasized and intrinsically trivial. And yet this fact of racial distinction based on color was the greatest thing in my life and absolutely determined it, because this surrounding group, in alliance and agreement with the white European world, was settled and determined upon the fact that I was and must be a thing apart. (p. 136)

Du Bois felt ostracized based on his skin color. He knew that skin color was the only difference that set him apart from his peers. He knew that he was just as smart as the White people around him. He also knew that he was as physically strong. However, his peers felt that Du Bois must be
different than them because he was Black, and they were White. The fact that he was Black set Du Bois apart and limited his opportunities.

However, this prejudice focused Du Bois’s scholarship. Du Bois (1968/2012) wrote, “Had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshiper at the shrine of the social order and economic development into which I was born” (p. 27). Du Bois would have been inclined to praise the society and economics of his time if he did not face this prejudice. He did not see his race as a problem, but White people did.

Du Bois used that prejudice to guide his work. Du Bois (2004) wrote, “As time flew I felt not so much disowned and rejected as rather drawn up into higher spaces and made part of a mightier mission” (p. 7). Du Bois used his ostracization to focus his work on disproving the idea that Blacks were intellectually inferior and providing better educational opportunities for Blacks. Du Bois was motivated to be part of this larger mission because he saw the injustices that Blacks experienced. They were kept from larger society. Children were taught that White people were better than Black people. He worked to change those injustices.

Du Bois saw that his race and skin color kept him from the larger society. He (1968/2012) wrote, “What was wrong was that I and people like me and thousands of others who might have my ability and aspiration, were refused permission to be a part of this world” (p. 27). Because of his race, Du Bois was ostracized from the White society. No matter how much talent and intelligence he had, he would never be accepted by White people because he was Black. He also saw how that belittling was dangerous to Black children. Du Bois (2004) wrote:

How easy, then, by emphasis and omission to make children believe that every great soul the world ever saw was a white man’s soul; that every great thought the world ever knew was a white man’s thought; that every great deed the world ever did was a white man’s deed; that every great dream the world ever sang was a white man’s dream. (pp. 22-23)
By emphasizing the accomplishments of White men and leaving out the accomplishments of all others, including Black men and women, children of all races grow up believing that only White men have done things that matter. Du Bois highlights this indoctrination of children to show that White men are not the only people, who have accomplished great feats. Just like how classical education should be broadened to include the histories and cultures of more than just White European men, children and adults should learn about the accomplishments of all people.

Du Bois also warned against the treatment of Blacks in the South. He wrote that Southern whites insisted that “a benevolent guardianship of whites over blacks is the ideal thing. They assume that white people not only know better what Negroes need than Negroes themselves, but that they are anxious to supply these needs” (Du Bois, 2004, p. 113). White Southerners deluded themselves into believing that they were better at giving Black people what they needed than Black people were at providing it for themselves. Du Bois believed that White people would never provide for Black people as well as Black people would for themselves. If White Southerners allowed Black Southerners to decide for themselves, then the South would be stronger. According to Du Bois (2004):

If the Negro could speak for himself in the South instead of being spoken for, if he could defend himself instead of having to depend on the chance sympathy of white citizens, how much healthier a growth of democracy the South would have. (p. 114)

If each citizen in the South was allowed the right to decide for themselves, then the South would be more democratic. If White people made decisions for Black people and spoke for Black people, the South was limiting its democracy. W. E. B. Du Bois warned that the South needed to change its ways for Black people to be freer.

One of Du Bois’s main views on education was that the smartest ten percent of Black people should be allowed to study at the highest level and guide other Black people to greatness. According to Du Bois (1968/2012):
I believed in the higher education of a Talented Tenth who through their knowledge of modern culture could guide the American Negro into a higher civilization. I knew that without this the Negro would have to accept white leadership, and that such leadership could not always be trusted to guide this group into self-realization and to its highest cultural possibilities. (p. 70)

Du Bois believed that Black people needed Black leaders. If they had White leaders, then the White leaders would not necessarily always act in the best self-interest of Black people. They would probably not have high enough expectations of Black people, nor would they motivate Black people to believe in themselves. For these reasons, Black people needed Black leaders, who were properly trained. These Black leaders needed to go to liberal arts colleges instead of ending their educations with high school graduation or going to technical colleges to learn a trade.

Du Bois strongly fought against purely menial training for Black children and young adults. Du Bois (1968/2012,) wrote, “We want our children trained as intelligent human beings should be, and we will fight for all time against any proposal to educate black boys and girls simply as servants and underlings, or simply for the use of other people” (p. 92). He promoted higher and liberal education for Black people and did not want the only form of education to be technical education for Black people. Du Bois believed that Black people were just as intelligent as White people and that they should receive just as many educational opportunities.

Du Bois also believed that Black people would only advance under the leadership of Black leaders, who were properly trained. In his 1903 speech, “The Training of Negroes for Social Power,” Du Bois argued:

The history of civilization seems to prove that no group or nation which seeks advancement and true development can despise or neglect the power of well-trained minds; and this power of intellectual leadership must be given to the talented tenth among American Negroes before this race can seriously be asked to assume the responsibility of dispelling its own ignorance. (Foner, 1970a, p. 133)
To advance, Black people needed well-trained Black brains and Du Bois believed that the most talented Black people should receive that training. Only Black leaders could help Black people to become less ignorant. White leaders would not be as motivated or believe that Black people could rid themselves of ignorance.

To train Black leaders to guide Black people, Du Bois believed that they needed Black colleges and the leaders would leave the colleges and set up public schools for Black children. According to Du Bois:

> Upon the foundation stone of a few well-equipped Negro colleges of high and honest standards can be built a proper system of free common schools in the South for the masses of the Negro people; any attempt to found a system of public schools on anything less than this—on narrow ideals, limited or merely technical training—is to call blind leaders for the blind. (Foner, 1970a, p. 133)

Du Bois did not want Black people to merely rely on industrial schools. He believed that Black people should receive a vast liberal education. Their colleges should be well-supported and superior. Black leaders needed the best training because they needed to have a vision for a better future and know how to lead Black people to that freeing future. They could not be like blind people leading other blind people because then they would not be able to see where they were all going in the future.

Du Bois did not believe that there was no place for industrial education. In a speech, he declared:

> Manual training can and ought to be used in [high] schools, but as a means and not as an end—to quicken intelligence and self-knowledge and not to teach carpentry; just as arithmetic is used to train minds and not to make skilled accountants. (Foner, 1970a, p. 134)

Du Bois wanted industrial education used to make Black people smarter and more well-rounded individuals. Any form of education grows the mind. Just because Black people took a technical
course, it did not mean that they needed to have only menial jobs. They could also have more intellectual job. Du Bois believed that many forms of education were necessary. He said that “The public-school system is designed to furnish the necessary intelligence for the ordinary worker, the secondary school for the more gifted worker, and the college for the exceptional few” (Foner, 1970a, p. 135). While some Blacks would not need to go beyond a high school education, Du Bois believed that future Black leaders needed a college education. Just because they were Black, they should not be excluded from going to college. Their race needed them to receive that college education, so they could come back and lead the rest of their people.

Du Bois’s views on education often contrasted with Booker T. Washington’s views. Talking about his debate with Booker T. Washington, Du Bois (1968/2012) stated:

These two theories of Negro progress were not absolutely contradictory. I recognized the importance of the Negro gaining a foothold in trades and his encouragement in industry and common labor. Mr. Washington was not absolutely opposed to college training and sent his own children to college. But he did minimize its importance, and discouraged the philanthropic support of higher education; while I openly and repeatedly criticized what seemed to me the poor work and small accomplishment of the Negro industrial school. (p. 70)

Both Du Bois and Washington believed that the other view of education was sometimes necessary. Du Bois believed that technical education was important and likewise Washington believed that college was useful for some Blacks. Du Bois did argue with Washington when he belittled a college education and discouraged people from donating money to help Blacks go to college. Also, Du Bois wanted higher standards for industrial training for Blacks.

Another disagreement that Du Bois had with Washington was that Washington promoted submitting to the White people when Du Bois thought that Blacks should fight in the civil rights movement. Du Bois (1968/2012) wrote, “At a time when Negro civil rights called for organized and aggressive defense, [Washington] broke down that defense by advising acquiescence or at
least no open agitation” (p. 72). Du Bois believed that Washington ruined their chances by telling other Blacks to just give in or at least not agitate Whites. Du Bois thought that Blacks should fight and not give in.

Du Bois made it possible for Black leaders to receive a liberal arts education. Through his own diligence and perseverance, he demonstrated that Blacks were just as capable of a quality scholarship as Whites. Thanks to Du Bois, many Blacks today go on to higher education.

August Wilson

When August Wilson passed away in 2005 at the age of 60, his New York Times obituary referred to Wilson as “Theater’s Poet of Black America” (Isherwood, 2005, headline). Wilson used both poetry and plays to chronicle the lives of Black Americans. Isherwood (2005) wrote, “In his work, Mr. Wilson depicted the struggles of black Americans with uncommon lyrical richness, theatrical density and emotional heft, in plays that gave vivid voices to people on the frayed margins of life” (para. 12). His characters reflected ordinary, Black Americans with relatable burdens. The characters spoke lyrically and authentically. Where did Wilson develop such lyricism and authenticity? In this section, I will explore how Wilson’s educational choices influenced his writing.

While researching August Wilson, I came across the 2006 book, Conversations with August Wilson, which was edited by Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig. This book is full of interviews with Wilson from 1984 to 2004 and gives insight into Wilson’s thinking and decision-making. Wilson’s upbringing and education deeply influenced his plays.

August Wilson was mainly raised by his mother, and she provided a strong foundation for him. Bryer and Hartig (2006) write that Wilson’s mother, “Daisy Wilson, whose maiden name her son eventually took, was a strong, proud woman who believed in the value of education and in the uniqueness and limitless possibilities of her children” (p. xi). Daisy Wilson encouraged and supported August Wilson and she knew that education would prepare him for success. In a 1987 interview with Dinah Livingston, Wilson described his mother:
She had a sixth-grade education, but she was a very good reader. She taught us all to read, and she would read us books. I’d always gotten straight A’s, and all the teachers had told her that I could be anything I wanted to be; it was up to me. So she was trying to impress this upon me. (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 47)

Despite her own limited education, Daisy Wilson equipped her children to read well, and she pushed August Wilson to work at his highest level. August Wilson made high grades in school and his teachers recognized his high capabilities. Daisy Wilson, as his mother, ensured that August knew that he could reach his goals. One of the ways that Wilson could reach his goals was through reading, which he learned to love through his mother. Bryer and Hartig (2006) wrote, “Reading was very important to [Wilson’s] mother” (p. xi). Through reading, Wilson gained knowledge that he used in his plays. In a 1988 interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson talked about books he had read:

> I can remember reading *Invisible Man* when I was fourteen years old. In fact, I read all the books in the Negro section of the library. There were only about thirty or forty books there. I read them all. I read Langston Hughes, of course, and *Invisible Man*, and Dunbar. (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 66)

Reading the African American literature in his local library gave Wilson the background he needed to write. At the pivotal age of fourteen, Wilson read influential books, such as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. By reading books by other African Americans, Wilson was able to widen his experiences to include theirs. In a 1997 interview with Bonnie Lyons, Wilson said, “My mother taught me to read when I was four years old, and in the library for the first time in my life I felt free. I could read whole books on subjects that interested me. I’d read about the Civil War or theology” (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 207). Wilson used reading to educate himself. He read voraciously. Reading gave Wilson the freedom to learn about whatever topic interested him. Reading opened the world up to him.
Wilson’s reading was one way that he educated himself. However, Wilson also had more traditional educational experiences as well. In a 1984 interview with Michael Feingold, Wilson described his schooling experience. He transitioned from a diverse neighborhood grade school to a prestigious Catholic high school, in which he was the only Black student. He got teased relentlessly and got into fights frequently. One day about 40 kids waited for him outside the school, so the principal sent him home in a cab. Wilson decided that he did not want to attend that school anymore, and he transferred to the local technical high school, where the academic work was only at a fifth-grade level. Wilson knew that he was not being challenged enough academically, so he then transferred to a public high school, where the work was on a high school level.

In a 1988 interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson talked more about his schooling experience. At his new high school, Wilson did not do any of the work assigned to him until one day when his history teacher gave him an intriguing assignment: To write a paper on any historical figure. Wilson chose Napoleon because he had always been fascinated by him. Wilson ended up writing a 20-page paper, which had footnotes and a bibliography. The teacher handed him back his paper with an A plus on it and an E on it and told Wilson that he would give him one of those two grades for his paper, but Wilson needed to prove to him that he had written the paper, not one of his older sisters. Wilson told his teacher, “Hey, listen, I write [my sisters’] papers, so I mean, you know, you just have to take my word” (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 67). When his teacher did not believe him and circled the E on his paper before he handed it back, Wilson ripped the paper up and hurled it in the trash can. Then he walked out of the school, never to go back inside the building. In the 1984 Feingold interview, Wilson said, “Instead of going to school I would go right outside the principal’s office—they had a basketball court there—and just shoot baskets all day” (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 14). He kept his vow to never enter the building again. He still went to the school building every day, but instead of going inside to his classroom, he stayed outside and shot hoops. In the 1988 Moyers interview, Wilson remarked, “As I look
back on it, of course, I see that I wanted [the principal] to come and say, ‘Why aren’t you in school?’ so I could tell someone. And he never came out” (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 67). Wilson was looking for a school official to listen to his side of the story. If the principal had come outside and talked with Wilson, he might have gone back inside and finished his high school education. However, nobody came outside and talked with Wilson. Eventually Wilson stopped going to the high school each day and instead he went to the local library.

The library provided Wilson with the means to continue his education. In a 1997 interview with Bonnie Lyons, Wilson was asked, “You’re self-educated. How do you feel about schools and self-education?” and Wilson replied:

The schools are horrible and don’t teach anybody anything. From about the fifth grade on, I was always butting heads with my teachers. I would ask them questions and they would say, “Shut up. Sit down,” because they didn’t know the answers. So I’d go to the library to find out. (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 207)

Instead of encouraging Wilson’s curiosity, his teachers ordered him to be quiet. He could not find the answers to his questions in school, so he went to the library. By reading the books in the library, Wilson was able to find the answers to his questions.

Reading also helped Wilson to become a better playwright. In a 1987 interview with David Savran, Wilson reflected on his playwright influences: He named Amiri Baraka and Philips Hayes Dean as two Black playwrights who wrote realistic Black dialogue. Even though he had a few playwright influences, he had not read a lot of the classic playwrights. He had never read any Henrik Ibsen, Tennessee Williams or George Bernard Shaw and he had only read or seen a couple Shakespearean plays. Savran was surprised that Wilson did not know many plays when his plays were well-written and evolved well. Wilson replied, “The foundation of my playwriting is poetry . . . After writing poetry for twenty-one years, I approach a play the same way” (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 23). Wilson was first a poet and then he became a dramatist, however, he never left poetry. Instead, he used poetry to guide his work.
Reading the entire African American section of the library influenced Wilson’s plays. He centered his plays on the experiences of Black people in America. In a 1990 interview with Vera Sheppard, Wilson remarked, “I take the entire black experience in America, from the first black in 1619 until now, and claim that as my material. That’s my story, my life story, and that’s a lot to write about” (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 210). Wilson claimed the experiences of Black people in America since 1619 as his life story and wrote his plays about those experiences. Their stories became his stories.

Wilson also became an advocate for Black culture. In the 1990 Sheppard interview, Wilson stated:

There is nothing wrong with the way anyone does anything. It is only when one culture tries to impose its culture on others and says that your life is deficient unless, for instance, you know Mozart and Beethoven and all the rest of that culture. (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 107)

Wilson argues against people of one culture belittling another culture. He witnessed people putting down Black culture and he knew that Black culture was to be appreciated. In a 1987 interview with Dinah Livingston, Wilson remarked:

You see, blacks in American society have had to respond to the way Europeans respond to the world in order to survive in the society. And they have not been allowed their cultural differences. I think that if we move toward claiming the strongest part of ourselves, which is the African parts, so that we can participate in the society as Africans, we would be all stronger for it. (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 57)

Wilson saw African Americans having to learn European-American cultural norms in order to succeed in society. He advocated for African Americans to embrace their African parts in order to participate in society more authentically. He argued that by embracing their African parts, then they could be stronger.
During his interviews, Wilson was often questioned about African Americans finding the African parts inside them. In a 1988 interview with Bill Moyers, after Moyers asked him if Blacks searching for the African inside of them would be destructive to their lives, Wilson replied:

To say that I am an African, and I can participate in this society as an African, and I don’t have to adopt European values, European aesthetics, and European ways of doing things in order to live in the world—how is that destructive? (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 70)

Wilson did not see African Americans participating as Africans in society as destructive. Instead, he applauded African Americans, who embraced the African parts of their lives. Wilson remarked, “There is an inner strength that comes with recognizing that this is okay, that there is nothing wrong with being African” (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 71). Wilson celebrated Black people embracing being African. He saw them as being strong. In contrast, he also saw that many African Americans needed to deny their Africanity in order to survive in American society. In that 1988 Moyers interview, Wilson also said, “If in order to accomplish some of the things which the black middle class has accomplished, you have had to give up that self, then you are not affirming the value of the African being” (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 79). When the Black middle class had to deny their culture in order to be accepted, then they could show that they valued their African-ness. Wilson stressed, “There’s nothing wrong with being African, there’s nothing wrong with African culture, and there’s nothing wrong with the black American culture. . . But because it’s different, it’s frowned upon” (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 79). Wilson advocated for Black people to embrace their culture and being African, and he fought for Black culture to be accepted in every area of society.

Carter G. Woodson

My last profile of a famous African American is about Carter G. Woodson, who was a historian and writer and was known as the “Father of Black History.” His most famous book was
his 1933 *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Woodson’s upbringing and education influenced his career and ideas about Black education.

Carter G. Woodson was born on December 19, 1875. Woodson’s parents were not highly educated themselves, but they “instilled in their children not only high morality and strong character through religious teachings but also a thirst for education” (Goggin, 1993, p. 9).

Woodson’s parents encouraged Woodson and his six siblings to get their educations. Woodson’s mother could read and write and “expected her son to work hard to obtain an education” (Goggin, 1993, p. 10). She taught Woodson about the value of a good education. Woodson’s father taught Woodson other important lessons. He “credited his father, who remained illiterate all his life, with teaching him his most important lessons. . . He commanded his children to never accept insult from whites, compromise their principles, mislead their fellowmen, or betray their people” (Goggin, 1993, p. 10). After learning such lessons, it is no wonder that Woodson would go on to promote the learning of Black history and fight against racism.

Growing up, Woodson had to work to help support his family. He took advantage of the educational opportunities that crossed his path. As a teenager, Woodson worked in the coal mines and one of his coworkers ran a tearoom for Black coal miners. When this coworker discovered that Woodson could read, he “engaged him to read the daily newspapers to the group in exchange for free fruit and ice cream” (Goggin, 1993, p. 11). Through reading newspapers, Woodson learned about history and economics.

When Woodson was 20, he enrolled in a Black high school and finished the four years of coursework in two years. Then he enrolled in Berea College, which was an integrated college in Kentucky. Woodson took courses in literature, sociology, rhetoric, science, history, economics, and international law (Goggin, 1993, pp. 12-13). At Berea College, “Woodson was thrust into an educational and social milieu that forced him to deal emotionally and intellectually with the values, attitudes, and ideas of poor Appalachian whites, who were potentially, if not in fact, his social and academic equals” (Goggin, 1993, p. 14). He had not been around many poor white
people before. He had to navigate interactions with white people, who probably viewed Woodson as inferior to them. Berea brought him into a new environment and Woodson learned from the curriculum and the community. Goggin (1993) wrote:

Woodson held a deep respect for the value of manual labor as a means of building character and preparing for life. Years later Woodson argued that a combination of classical and vocational training was best for blacks, training similar to what he had received at Berea. (p. 14)

Woodson advocated for both classical education and vocational training, inspired by his own education at Berea College. At least at the beginning of his career, he did not prefer one method over the other. In later years, he would start to advocate for more technical training for Blacks as a way for them to succeed in society.

Woodson had three main philosophies in education. He believed that Blacks could advance through education. He also believed that Black history should be taught to everyone. Finally, he believed that Blacks should be taught the skills they needed to survive.

Woodson fervently believed that Blacks could advance in society through the power of education. He witnessed the power of education to advance Blacks through the ten years that he spent working in the Washington public schools. Even after Woodson left the school system, Goggin (1993) wrote that Woodson “maintained an interest in the public schools and a commitment to the importance of vocational and adult education for blacks” (p. 48). Woodson advocated for public education for all Blacks and continued education for adults. He believed that adults need vocational training to increase their livelihood. Woodson knew that education prepared Blacks for advancement.

Secondly, Woodson believed that Blacks needed to know, understand, and appreciate their own history. He thought that if Blacks knew their own history, then they could gain economic and political power. This drove him to lead the Black history movement. Goggin (1993) wrote, “Woodson’s fervent belief that blacks’ enlightenment about their history was
fundamental to overcoming economic and political powerlessness led him to devote his considerable talents to expanding the base of the Negro history movement” (p. 140). Woodson believed so deeply in the power of Black people knowing their own history that he promoted the Black history movement and consequently became known as the “Father of Black History.”

Woodson would often give speeches to Black audiences. When Booker T. Washington invited him to give speeches in front of Tuskegee faculty and students, Woodson:

Through the content of his speeches and, more importantly, in the delivery of his message, … communicated to the audiences his ardent belief in promoting accurate knowledge of black history. Woodson overwhelmed his audience with a wealth of information in his speeches, starting with African history and working his way through all of African American history, and he frequently electrified them with his oratorical skills. (Goggin, 1993, p. 42)

Woodson’s speeches were in-depth, engaging, and inspiring. Audiences learned about a wide perspective of Black history, from African history to African American history. Through his speeches, Woodson demonstrated his desire for Blacks to know the history of their people. Woodson believed the knowledge of Black history would not only help African Americans to strengthen themselves politically but would also change the perspective of White Americans. According to Goggin (1993):

Woodson ardently believed that education in black history, rather than participation in black protest organizations, was the primary vehicle for the political empowerment of black Americans. At the same time, he believed, albeit somewhat naively, that if white Americans were educated about black history, their racism would subside. (p. 140)

Woodson saw knowledge of Black history as the gateway for Black people to become more politically powerful and for White people to become less racist. According to Woodson, more people knowing Black history would heal America.
Finally, Woodson believed that schools needed to teach Black people skills that would help them in their daily lives. He saw the lack of this form of education as a failure on the part of the schools and specifically Black educators. Goggin (1993) wrote, “In Woodson’s view, black educators not only failed to transmit black cultural values through education in black history but also failed to teach blacks to earn a living” (p. 141). In addition to not teaching about Black history enough, educators did not teach a curriculum that enabled Blacks to earn money successfully. Perhaps it was a constraint of the time period that Woodson lived in, but he advocated for Blacks to learn a technical education. During the time that Woodson lived, most of the jobs available to African Americans were jobs that required a vocational education, so Woodson promoted that form of education. According to Goggin (1993), “Educational curriculum needed to be made relevant to the people being taught. . . Woodson advocated greater attention to the improvement of basic skills and additional emphasis on vocational education” (p. 160). Woodson believed that the education Black people needed was vocational and improved their basic skills. Since many Blacks were living in urban centers, “Woodson maintained that the black masses needed to be taught new vocational skills suitable for urban industrial living” (Goggin, 1993, p. 160). Black people required an education centered on their needs for higher-paying, urban jobs. Woodson believed that the most suitable form of education would be vocational.

Analysis of the People Profiled

I chose all four people to profile because they are all African Americans, who made tremendous accomplishments for African Americans and all Americans. In this section, I will write about the similarities I saw in the lives of the people profiled. Then I will discuss the themes of classical education and African American education in their lives.

One similarity that I saw in the lives of all four people is that they loved learning. Du Bois and Woodson were especially well-educated, which is extra significant because they both lived during a time period when not many Blacks received higher education. Collins was well-
educated for a woman of her time as well, and she and Wilson both showed their love for education through their love of reading. Collins read voraciously as a child and she continued that drive to read as an adult. She read every book she could to learn what she needed to teach her students. When Wilson dropped out of high school, he continued his education through reading library books. Reading those works of literature gave him the foundation he needed to write his poetry and plays. All four people profiled did not stop learning when they reached adulthood. Instead, they wrote about the necessity of continuing their educations. They were all united in a love of learning.

All four people profiled also valued education and viewed education as a key to advancement for Black people. Du Bois believed that the talented tenth of Black people should receive a liberal arts higher education and become prepared to lead other Black people. He also believed that all Black people needed to receive some form of education whether it be secondary school, an industrial school or a liberal arts education. Woodson thought that all Black people deserved an education and they especially needed to learn about Black culture and history. Only once they learned about their own history would they truly appreciate their past and be able to move on to the future. Woodson also believed that once White people learned about Black history then they would be less prejudiced towards Black people. Likewise, Collins believed that education was the key to her students’ success. She worked tirelessly to give her students the best education possible. Finally, Wilson believed that education was important even though schools had failed him, and other students like him. He criticized schools for not educating students well, but he still believed that education was important.

The third similarity that all four people profiled had was that they all believed that Black children could learn just as well as White children. All four were smart and capable students. They all disproved the notion that they were not as smart as White children. Collins knew her own intelligence and knew that her students were capable of learning just as well as not only White children but also more affluent children. Du Bois believed that Black students were as
deserving of a liberal education as White students and that the talented tenth were smart enough to benefit from that sort of higher education. Wilson faced prejudice from his teacher when his teacher accused Wilson of cheating. Wilson knew that he had written his paper and he left school not because he could not handle the education but because the teacher would not believe Wilson when he said that he had written that paper.

The fourth similarity that Collins, Du Bois, Wilson and Woodson all shared was that they all faced prejudice and persevered. Du Bois was one of the only Black students in his schools and especially at Harvard and in Germany, he heard racist rhetoric from his professors and classmates. The White professors and classmates shared the prevailing notions that Black people were scientifically inferior to White people. Du Bois did not believe this idea and he worked tirelessly to disprove this notion. Woodson also faced prejudice in his educational journey.

Finally, Collins, Du Bois, Wilson and Woodson all believed that Black culture should be valued and appreciated. Woodson especially believed that Black history and culture had value and that everyone should study it. He believed that if White people studied Black history and culture, then they would have more respect for Black people and become less racist. Wilson used Black culture in his plays, and he spoke about how Black people needed to appreciate their own culture more. He saw society belittling Black culture and trying to turn it into White culture. He believed that Black people needed to appreciate their own culture more. Du Bois also believed that Black culture and history were important. He fought against the idea that the only valuable contributions to society came from White culture. He argued that Asians and Africans contributed just as much to society as Europeans. To all four people, Black culture was important and should be valued.

Classical Education and African American Education in the Profiles

In all four profiles, I discovered examples of classical education or African American education. Classical education played a role in the lives of all four people profiled. Also, all four
people felt strongly about African American education. In this section, I will discuss the connections that I can make to classical or African American education.

One way that I can connect the lives of the four people I profiled to classical education is that all four people had some knowledge of classical education or the classics. Both W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson were educated in the classics. Du Bois even took Latin and Greek, which allowed him to meet the college entrance requirements at that time. Receiving a classical education prepared both Du Bois and Woodson for their distinguished careers. Marva Collins learned fables, poems, and Shakespeare as a child. As an adult, she discovered her ignorance of many of the classics and educated herself in them. As a teenager, August Wilson read the entire African American section of the library, so in this way, he educated himself in African American classics. Having a strong foundation in those classics prepared him to write his plays as an adult. All four people profiled benefited from an education based in some form of classic literature.

Also, Du Bois, Collins, and Woodson, at some points of his life, believed that a classical or liberal arts education was important for some people. Du Bois argued for the most talented Black people to receive a classical education, so that they could be better prepared to lead other Black people. He saw a classical education as being the top form of education at the time. He believed that Black leaders were capable of learning it and that it would equip them well to lead the Black masses. Likewise, Collins saw a liberal arts education as being the best training for a teacher because a liberal arts education gives a teacher knowledge to tie in to the curriculum. Collins believed that students needed a lot of knowledge to learn better, and she advocated for teachers to prepare themselves well by acquiring a liberal arts education. Finally, although Woodson believed in a technical education for Blacks towards the end of his life, he, at times, would advocate for a classical education for some Blacks. He thought that a classical education was a solid form of education for Black people. He argued for a technical education later because he saw it as being more useful for most Blacks, however, he still believed that some Blacks should strive for a classical education.
One connection that I make to African American culture is that all four people profiled believed that people should embrace Black history and/or culture. August Wilson, in particular, spoke frequently about how Black people should not be ashamed of their Africanness. Instead, they should be proud of it. As a poet and a playwright, he placed Black culture in the center of his work. The compelling stories that he told in his work demonstrated that Black culture was rich and important. Carter G. Woodson spoke eloquently about the importance of Black and White people learning about Black history. He believed that Black people would take pride in their rich history and White people would become less racist when faced with the illustriousness of Black history. W. E. B. Du Bois fought against racism his entire life. He never believed that he was less than his White peers. He wrote about how African accomplishments paved the way for European breakthroughs. While Collins did not believe that Black history should be taught separately from American history, she taught her students to take pride in themselves. If they were Black, they should take pride in their Blackness. In this way, all four people profiled valued Black history and/or culture.

All four people profiled also believed that African Americans could achieve greatness. They did not feel in any way inferior to White people. Collins took pride in her own intelligence and diligence. She also believed that all her students could learn if she persevered enough in teaching them. She never gave up on a student because of his/her background. Du Bois denied any inferiority in his own abilities. He also advocated for the most talented Black people to attend prestigious universities. He believed that they were capable of learning that rigorous education. Woodson also believed that he was as smart as his White peers. He also believed that Black history was just as important as White history. Finally, Wilson believed that Black people were just as talented as White people, and that once they embraced their Blackness, they could realize that talent for themselves. All four people profiled knew that Black people were just as capable and talented as White people. They were confident in their own abilities and talents. They recognized the greatness in Black people as a whole.
Conclusion

All the people profiled are alike because they were all distinguished in their fields. They all believed that education was important, even if they did not have the best educational experiences of their own. While speculating on the educational possibilities of my students, I know a few parts of their curriculum that I must include: From Collins, I want to include the idea that no topic is off-limits or above the intellectual abilities of my students. A dedicated teacher can make the main ideas of any work of literature accessible to students. From Du Bois, I want to include the idea that Black students are capable of a classical, liberal education. They should be encouraged to strive for intellectual greatness. From Wilson, I know that the arts are important, and students should be allowed to express themselves. Also, I should believe in my students and pay attention when they are struggling. Finally, from Woodson, I have learned that Black history is vital, and every student needs to learn it. Like Woodson, I believe that when people encounter the history of Black people, they gain respect for Black people no matter what their background. With the lessons that I have learned from studying Collins, Du Bois, Wilson, and Woodson, I am better prepared to speculate on how to teach classical education to African American students in a way that creates a space for African Americans to empower themselves.
CHAPTER 5
CULTURALLY EMPOWERING PEDAGOGY

Those who bring different experiences to school are viewed as deficient when assessed through mainstream norms. We are told that we must find out what kids know and don’t know so that we can remediate them.

-Lisa Delpit, “Multiplication is for White People”:
Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children

In the previous chapter, I profiled four prominent African Americans, who had used their educations to empower themselves. W. E. B. Du Bois saw no reason why he, as a Black man, was less intelligent or capable than any of his White classmates or professors. Even as his professors lectured about the “inferiority” of the Black man, Du Bois did not believe that notion. Nothing in his learning had communicated that notion to him. Also, Carter G. Woodson believed that Black people would gain more pride and White people would become less racist by studying African history. Both men believed in the power of education. As I read, I realized that I wanted this empowering education for my African American students. I wanted to provide opportunities for them to empower themselves through the classical education curriculum. In this chapter, I will discuss what a culturally empowering pedagogy is. I draw upon the ideas of culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy to build a culturally empowering pedagogy. In this next section, I will discuss the need for a culturally empowering pedagogy.

Culturally Contested Pedagogy

Teaching a classical curriculum to Black students brings contradictions. Unless the educator modifies the curriculum, it can be too Western-European and male centric. Students of color would not identify with much of the content. The cultures of the students and the culture of the classical curriculum diverge. They are contested. To understand the contrast, I turn to Guofang Li’s 2006 book, Culturally Contested Pedagogy, which she wrote after studying the
experiences of Chinese families in an elementary school. Li witnessed the disconnect between the Chinese parents, who believed in a traditional method of learning to read, and the White teachers, who taught literacy through a progressive pedagogy. This pedagogy confused the parents, who had learned to read through more traditional methods. The parents also did not think that the teachers assigned enough homework, and they would scramble to find resources to give their children more academic practice at home. Through this study, Li discovered ways that teachers could modify their teaching and communication with families to teach the students more effectively and form a partnership with the parents.

One of the modifications Li found was that educators needed to “pay special attention to recognizing and valuing minority culture differences” (Li, 2006, p. 210). Teachers could not blindly continue the literacy programs that they had used with White students in the past without thinking about the differences that their new populations of students had. Beyond just recognizing the differences, they needed to value them also. As a White educator, I have discovered that I have a bias to my own culture and way of teaching. Most of my own teachers were also White females, and I felt comfortable in the style of teaching that I experienced. Most of the students that I teach now are African American and they have different backgrounds and cultures to my own and the style of teaching that I grew up with might not be as comfortable for them. I need to value the cultural differences that my students bring into the classroom.

Beyond just recognizing and valuing my students’ cultures, I need to see how their cultures are valued in the school curriculum. Perhaps their cultural knowledge is a valuable part of the school curriculum, but often the knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse students is not valued in the official school curriculum. According to Li (2006), successful “teachers not only learn about students’ cultures and backgrounds, but also recognize how students’ cultural knowledge is differentially situated and represented in the official knowledge of the school curriculum” (p. 211). If I do not recognize how the cultural knowledge of my students is
disregarded in the school curriculum, then I would not see the need to acknowledge their knowledge in my classroom.

Another practice that Li recommended was for teachers to get to know their students as individuals. Li (2006) wrote, “we cannot teach when we do not know who we are teaching” (p. 211). Teachers cannot blindly follow a curriculum and hope that their students will learn the content. They need to get to know each student individually so that they can teach to each student’s strengths and weaknesses. Another reason for teachers to get to know students individually is that students excel when teachers establish trust with them. According to Moses and Cobb (2001):

You need older people who are in constant enough contact with a small group of young people that you can develop a real relationship—a relationship that can move young people, penetrate their cultural barriers, and become a relationship that can help them grow. . .. Trust has to anchor these relationships, the belief that a grown-up person is not going to disappear in one way or another. (p. 132)

Students need to be able to trust their teachers and know that they can depend on them. By the teacher trying to get to know the student individually, the teacher demonstrates that he/she can be trusted. As Moses and Cobb (2001) wrote, “This kind of security is critical to populations of young people who have been hurt in different ways in their basic relationships with adults” (p. 133). Students, especially ones who have been let down by other adults in their lives, need to be able to trust their teachers in school. Trust helps them to learn.

Li also recommended that teachers examine their own beliefs and strive to understand the beliefs of their students’ parents. According to Li (2006), “To achieve cultural reciprocity and be responsive to the cultural beliefs that they do not share, it is necessary for teachers to undertake personal transformation in looking at their own beliefs and practices and understanding the parents’ beliefs” (p. 216). As a teacher and especially as a White teacher working with Black students, I need to look at my own beliefs and practices. I need to examine my beliefs for
evidence of White superiority or deficit thinking when it comes to the knowledge of my students. I also need to look critically at my practices to discern if I allow injustice in the classroom. To honor the cultural beliefs of my students and their families, I need to seek to hear and understand their beliefs. I must ask questions about their beliefs and value them.

Often, we are kept from valuing other people’s beliefs, especially in education, because we think that it is an “either-or” situation; either my beliefs are right, or their beliefs are right. Instead, Li (2006) wrote, “Achieving a plural consciousness and cultivating a pedagogy of cultural reciprocity, however, requires us to abandon the binary oppositions that prevail in the dominant educational canon” (p. 231). Traditional and progressive teaching methods can work together. Classical education and culturally relevant pedagogy can be used at the same time. Li (2006) argued, “With the increasing diversity in our classrooms and communities, the dominance of one paradigm is no longer possible or desirable” (p. 232). Educators should draw from multiple pedagogies and curricula to serve the educational needs of their students. When you lose the “either-or” fixation, then you open yourself up to possibilities. As Li (2006) wrote, “Viewing the two paradigms from outside the framework of binary opposition therefore allows us to explore new spaces for reciprocity between the two pedagogies” (p. 232). Instead of the two pedagogies being contested, educators can pull from both pedagogies and meet the needs of their students.

From Culturally Irrelevant to Culturally Relevant Teaching

When using classical education to teach African American students, educators often ask students to learn about knowledge that is outside of their cultures. It could be Ancient Greek culture, Chinese culture, Western European culture, or another culture. When we ask students to learn about another culture, we engage in culturally irrelevant teaching. It is important for students to learn about cultures outside of their own. However, if a student only learns about other cultures and never gets to appreciate their own culture in school, then the student does not feel that their culture is valued in their school community. To combat this, educators turn to culturally

In the first section of their book, Lugo Llerena et al. discuss why it is important to pursue culturally relevant teaching. Lugo Llerena et al. (2018) warn, “When there are no mirrors and everything is a window, there can be socioemotional and academic implications. Children may perceive one culture as more worthy and believe that those not represented are not valued” (p. 8). Lugo Llerena et al. are referencing Bishop’s (1990) idea of literature providing a mirror for children to see themselves and a window for children to learn about other perspectives. Due to a lack of diverse literature, some children are constantly looking through windows in the books that they read. When the literature students encounter does not reflect their cultures, then the students might feel that their cultures are not valued and that they as individuals are not appreciated.

Another problem might be that students encounter literature that is about their cultures, but it only contains stereotypes about their cultures. Lugo Llerena et al. (2018) write, “Classroom libraries and resources should honor and reflect students’ diversity rather than perpetuate the stereotypes that marginalize them” (p. 8). Teachers need to expand their classroom libraries and resources to include authentic, honoring books that bring dignity to students rather than reinforce stereotypes. Before including a book in their library, they should critically look through it and examine it for stereotypes. Students’ families would be a wonderful resource for finding authentic books about their cultures.

When curriculum is culturally irrelevant, it can elevate one culture over all others. According to Souto-Manning (2018):

> Culturally irrelevant curriculum fosters monocultural competence—honoring and prioritizing one culture while excluding all others—and it can have serious consequences
for all students including, but not limited to, those whose cultures are not represented. It cultivates White superiority and fosters prejudice. (p. 20)

Students, who do not belong to that one culture, feel marginalized. Students, who do belong to that one culture, might feel that they are better than their peers. Their feelings of superiority might be validated in their eyes. Prejudice against the other cultures might increase. Curriculum should not be monocultural.

One way that the curriculum might be culturally irrelevant for students is when it is normalized or standardized. When a curriculum is “one-size-fits-all,” students can feel disconnected from it. According to Lugo Llerena et al. (2018):

Efforts to ‘normalize’ curriculum and ‘standardize’ learning . . . presume that the knowledge that counts is in the textbooks and other curricular materials. Too often these efforts leave little room for curriculum to be enhanced by the knowledge, experiences, and questions that students bring to the classroom. (p. 9)

When teachers promote the knowledge from the textbook as the only knowledge that matters in the classroom, then students feel like their knowledge does not matter and does not have value. Students might not be as likely to ask questions and make connections to their own lives. Also, there might be little time for students to bring their cultures into the lesson.

One of the reasons why teachers turn to textbooks and other pre-packaged curricular materials is because they are under pressure to prepare students to take standardized tests. Teachers often want to help students grow in critical thinking and engage with the curriculum in a meaningful way, but they are also forced by school administration and policymakers to get results on state testing or else their jobs and/or their schools are at stake. Lugo Llerena et al. (2018) write, “Teachers experience a very real tension between getting students ready to take a high-stakes test—which may or may not use culturally relevant material—and preparing them to think critically and engage in meaningful and culturally relevant learning” (p. 11). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Georgia Department of Education petitioned to waive the Georgia Milestones End
of Grade Assessments (GMAS) in the spring of 2021. The Federal Department of Education denied their request, so my school, along with many other Georgian schools, had to administer the GMAS this past spring. Fifth graders take the GMAS in ELA, math, and science. At my school, I teach math and science to all the fifth graders and writing to my homeroom, so I felt tremendous pressure to make sure my students were ready to be tested in all the GMAS subjects. If I had not been under pressure to cover all the curriculum by mid-April, which was when our GMAS tests were administered, then I could have taught more creatively and prepared more culturally relevant lessons. Instead, I rushed through the last couple units and tried to do a quick review before students took the tests that would determine whether they were promoted to sixth grade, whether our school would be allowed to remain open in the future, and how effective of a teacher I was. Also, we have conditioned students into thinking that when the GMAS is over, then learning is over. My students, especially the ones that were new to our school, kept asking me if we would have fun after GMAS in the last month of school or if we would have to keep working and learning. I find it challenging as a teacher to be required to prepare my students for a high-stakes test when I know that they would benefit from more culturally relevant lessons.

To make the shift from culturally irrelevant pedagogy to culturally relevant pedagogy, we must make several changes. First, we must recognize that culture is always a part of education. Souto-Manning (2018) writes, “Ignoring the role of culture in teaching and curriculum effectively privileges the culture of power, sanctioning it as the standard against which performance, knowledge, and learning are measured” (p. 20). All teaching and curriculum contain cultural ideas. If we say that our curriculum does not promote any cultural agenda, it is in fact promoting the culture of power, which is often not an African American culture. Teachers need to examine their curriculum and teaching practices to see which cultures they are endorsing.

Next, we must become culturally competent. According to Souto-Manning, there are two steps to becoming culturally competent. She writes, “Understanding yourself as a cultural being is the first step in recognizing that every one of your students is a unique cultural being” (Souto-
We are so used to our own culture that we often do not recognize that we even have our own culture. This is especially true for White teachers, who grew up in mainly White classrooms and who work with mostly White colleagues, which was my experience. However, I worked for a year in a childcare center that served Black children and all my colleagues were Black, so I have a little bit of experience in being an outsider. When I worked at that center, I realized that many times I thought about a situation differently because of my culture. It was important for me to remember that just because my culture would face a situation a certain way, that did not mean that it was the right way or the only way to deal with that situation. Working at that childcare center helped me to relate to the cultures of my students in a positive way, but I even still can think that my culture’s way of thinking is the best.

To become culturally competent, educators also need to realize that their students have cultures, and they have important knowledge to share. Souto-Manning (2018) writes, “A second important step in becoming culturally competent is recognizing that your students are cultural beings and each of them—as members of families and communities—has rich funds of knowledge” (p. 41; emphasis in original). Not only is the teacher a cultural being, but the students are also. Moreover, they bring valuable funds of knowledge to school with them. Funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) is an idea that I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 6, but funds of knowledge are the ideas, talents, and information that students learn at home and in the communities. To be culturally competent, teachers need to honor the cultures and knowledge that students bring to the classroom.

Also, to shift from culturally irrelevant to culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers need to expand the curriculum to include the cultures of our students. Earlier in this chapter I discussed the pressure to stick to a required curriculum to prepare for state testing. Lugo Llerena et al. have some advice on how to still teach out of a culturally relevant pedagogy, by writing, “We must think of mandated curriculum as a starting place, not an ending place, and find ways to include new perspectives and materials, making curriculum and teaching more inclusive and..."
representative” (Lugo Llerena et al., 2018, p. 14). This requires more work on the part of a teacher. Instead, of just following a mandated curriculum, teachers should see what is missing in that curriculum and add it in. Think about the cultures of your students. Think about what false ideas or narratives you might be communicating if you just stick to the curriculum and bring in those real sources and different perspectives. By adding to the curriculum, you are creating a richer, educational experience for your students and creating opportunities for them to connect with and extend the lesson.

Finally, to shift into culturally relevant pedagogy, we must show the students that they are an important part of classrooms. According to Lugo Llerena et al. (2018):

If we want children to develop as successful learners, we must communicate that they belong in our classrooms. They need to see themselves, their cultures, their families, and their communities reflected in the materials and resources they find there. As culturally relevant teachers, we put the children we teach at the center of our practices. (p. 15)

Culturally irrelevant teachers often put the content first. They say that the cultures of their students do not matter because the content is what is important. Instead, culturally relevant teachers put the students first. They show the students that they belong in the classroom by including materials that honor their cultures. They create lessons that give students opportunities to connect the learning to their lives and communities.

Creating a Culturally Empowering Pedagogy

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I am building a culturally empowering pedagogy out of culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy. First, I will look at culturally responsive teaching. Then I will examine culturally relevant pedagogy. Last, I will discuss culturally sustaining pedagogy.
Culturally Responsive Teaching

The first pedagogy that I am using to build my culturally empowering pedagogy is culturally responsive teaching (CRT). This pedagogy was developed by Geneva Gay, who, in her 2000 book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, talked about how she had been working since 1975 to improve learning for diverse students. She grew frustrated with the low-achievement and low morale among African American, Latino, and Native American students. She saw students being forced into assimilationist educational practices and their diverse cultures being dishonored. Gay sought out new, liberating forms of education. According to Gay (2000),

Although called by many different names, including *culturally relevant, sensitive, centered, congruent, reflective, mediated, contextualized, synchronized*, and *responsive*, the ideas about why it is important to make classroom instruction more consistent with the cultural orientations of ethnically diverse students, and how this can be done, are virtually identical. (p. 29; emphasis in original)

Gay believed that there were different pedagogies that were creating very similar types of education. They all focused on keeping the cultures of the students central to the classroom. Gay chose to call her form of this type of education, culturally responsive teaching, which she defined as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). She believed that educators should respond to the cultural diversity of their students by making the curriculum more relevant to them and their cultures. Educators would connect their lessons to the experiences and cultures of their students. Gay (2000) argued that culturally responsive teaching “teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming” (p. 29; emphasis in original). Instead of assimilating students to a middle-class, White set of norms, educators recognize that their students have a variety of strengths to bring to the classroom and educators support the cultural diversity of their students.
CRT benefits students of color through helping them to “maintain identity and connections with their ethnic groups and communities; develop a sense of community, camaraderie, and shared responsibility; and acquire an ethic of success” (Gay, 2000, p. 30). Gay found that through CRT, students felt more secure in themselves and their specific cultural identities, and they were more successful in school.

Another author, who writes about culturally responsive teaching is Zaretta Hammond. In 2015, Hammond published the book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, which focused on how the brain responds to CRT and non-CRT practices.

Hammond makes the case for CRT because by following those approaches, a student’s brain is more receptive to learning. When the brain feels threatened, then it will shut down. Hammond (2015) writes, “As a culturally responsive teacher you have to familiarize yourself with common actions or conditions that make students feel unsafe, even if they cannot articulate this sense of threat” (p. 47). Even if students do not know that they feel unsafe, their brains respond to the feelings of threat. A culturally responsive teacher works to make the classroom safer and more welcoming. When the classroom is unsafe for student learning, then learners will respond in negative ways that keep them from learning. According to Hammond (2015), dependent learners who feel threatened “will avoid the perceived threat of public humiliation, [by] going into fight, flight, or freeze mode” (p. 47). All three of those responses are not conducive to learning. It is important that students feel safe and can trust their teacher. Hammond (2015) writes, “Trust, therefore, frees up the brain for other activities such as creativity, learning, and higher order thinking” (p. 76). When students trust their teacher, their brains do not feel threatened and they are able to focus on learning rather than fighting, fleeing or freezing. Culturally responsive teachers need to build a safe, trusting classroom environment.
Hammond also writes about how some cultures need attention-grabbing methods to activate their brain and signal to their brain that it is time to learn. According to Hammond (2015):

Cultures based on an oral tradition rely heavily on the [Reticular Activating System in the brain] to activate learning, using music, call and response, and other attention-grabbing strategies to signal something important. Learning isn’t a passive event but a dynamic action. It requires focused attention, active engagement, and conscious processing by the learner. (p. 48)

African American students come from oral tradition cultures, and they specifically need some of the strategies listed above to signal to their brain that learning is beginning. By using a strategy like music before new instruction, the student’s brain gets woken up and the student is more likely to remember the new information. To gain new knowledge, learners need to focus, actively engage in the lesson, and process it in their brains. CRT includes those attention-grabbing strategies that help students learn new information.

Hammond also advises teachers on how to make the new information stick. She writes that students need to connect the new information to their old knowledge. According to Hammond (2015):

So, to learn new content or skills, the brain figures out where to make connections to what we already know so that we ‘get it.’ To make learning stick, we have to determine what students already know and understand how they have organized it in their schema. From there we must construct culturally based connections or ‘scaffolds’ between the existing schema and the new content. (p. 49)

A strategy that Hammond recommends is for teachers to create culturally based links for students to use to connect new knowledge to old. Because the links are based in the students’ cultures, they can remember the new knowledge more effectively.
Another strategy that culturally responsive teachers use is to create lessons that allow students to challenge and stretch their brains. A teacher’s goal is for students to become independent learners. To learn independence, students need to be empowered and be given assignments, where they can challenge their brains. Hammond (2015) writes, “To empower dependent learners and help them become independent learners, the brain needs to be challenged and stretched beyond its comfort zone with cognitive routines and strategy” (p. 49). Teachers show how to attack problems, so that students know what to do on their own. According to Hammond (2015), “Culturally responsive teaching is also about empowerment and interrupting teaching practices that keep certain students dependent learners . . . challenge and stretch come with learning the moves to do more strategic thinking and information processing” (p. 49). Like the adage about teaching a man to fish, we need to teach our students how to learn, so they can gain more information on their own. Culturally responsive teachers empower and encourage students. They teach them strategies so students can grow into independent learners.

Another hallmark of culturally responsive teachers is that they establish rapport with students and help students to become connected to each other. Hammond (2015) writes, “Authentic engagement begins with remembering that we are wired to connect with one another. In communal cultures, it is at the center of daily living and learning” (p. 50). Students can engage in the lesson better when they know that they belong in the classroom community, and they have strong connections with the people around them. African American students come from communal cultures, so connections are even more vital for them than for students from more individualistic cultures. A strong culturally responsive teacher models connections and helps his/her students to form ties with each other.

Culturally responsive teachers also must be reflective to meet students’ needs. Hammond (2015) writes, ‘Being responsive to diverse students’ needs asks teachers to be mindful and present” (p. 53). When a teacher is mindful, then he/she is living in the moment and is reflective. The teacher is aware of each interaction with each student and focuses on each interaction instead
of thinking about past or future concerns. Hammond (2015) advises, “We each must do the ‘inside-out’ work required: developing the right mindset, engaging in self-reflection, checking our implicit biases, practicing social-emotional awareness, and holding an inquiry stance regarding the impact of our interactions on students” (p. 53). To be mindful and present, teachers must examine themselves. They must root out any biases that keep them from being culturally responsive teachers. They must be in tune with their own feelings. They must question their dealings with students and make sure that they responding to students in the best possible way. When teachers are mindful, then they are more prepared to teach students in a culturally responsive way.

Culturally responsive teachers embrace the cultures that students bring into the classroom. They empower students to transition from dependent learners to independent learners. They create safe classroom environments, where students feel comfortable, and their brains can pick up new information and connect it to old knowledge. Through culturally responsive teaching, students become confident, culturally proud, empowered learners.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

After studying educators, who successfully taught African American students, Gloria Ladson-Billings developed culturally relevant teaching, which she used to describe the techniques that those educators implemented. In *The Dream-Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) wrote, “Specifically, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). Educators use the cultures that students bring to the classroom to teach them. Instead of telling students that they need to lose their own cultures to adapt to a mainstream culture, teachers empower students by connecting the curriculum to the students’ cultures.

Ladson-Billings saw common themes in the culturally relevant teachers that she studied. One of the characteristics she saw was that those teachers had a high opinion of themselves and a
high opinion of their students. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), “Teachers with culturally relevant practices have high self-esteem and a high regard for others” (p. 37). The teachers she studied were confident in themselves and in their abilities as a teacher. They also respected their students and worked to give them the best education possible.

Also, she found that the teachers she studied knew that they were a valuable part of the community. Ladson-Billings (2009) wrote, “Teachers with culturally relevant practices see themselves as part of the community, see teaching as giving back to the community, and encourage their students to do the same” (p. 41). These teachers considered themselves as part of the communities, where they taught, and they knew that what they did in the classroom affected the community around the school. They also taught their students how to give back to the community.

Ladson-Billings also discovered that the teachers she studied thought of teaching as more than just teaching and themselves as more than just teachers. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), “Teachers with culturally relevant practices see teaching as an art and themselves as artists” (p. 45). A teacher, who feels that he/she is an artist and teaching is an art, is more likely to work at teaching until it is near perfect and is going to face teaching situations creatively. A teacher, who views teaching as an art, is not going to satisfy themselves with a cookie-cutter approach to teaching. Instead, the teacher is going to face each classroom and each lesson with imagination and try different strategies until he/she finds the best one.

Another characteristic that Ladson-Billings found was that the teachers she studied had confidence that each student could thrive. Ladson-Billings (2009) wrote, “Teachers with culturally relevant practices believe that all students can succeed” (p. 48). They are not willing to let any students fail. They believe that all their students are capable of success. They have high expectations for all their students.

Ladson-Billings also found that these teachers helped their students to know their multi-faceted selves. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), “Teachers with culturally relevant practices
help students make connections between their community, national, and global identities” (p. 52). These teachers’ students knew who they were in the community, the nation, and the world. The teachers helped them see their place in the different settings.

The last characteristic that Ladson-Billings found in the teachers she studied was that they believed that their students contained knowledge that the teachers needed to draw out of them. Ladson-Billings (2009) wrote, “Teachers with culturally relevant practices see teaching as ‘digging knowledge out’ of students” (p. 56). These teachers recognize that students bring valuable knowledge to school and their job is to help them pull it out of themselves. They would agree with Paulo Freire’s (1970/1993) notion of effective education being problem-posing education, where the teacher and students use dialogue to learn, instead of banking education, where teachers fill students with knowledge.

Teachers, who use culturally relevant pedagogy, embrace the cultures that the students bring into the classroom. They have high expectations for every student. They have high expectations for themselves as teachers, and they believe that they can help their students to succeed. They know that they are a valuable part of the community, and they teach their students how to give back to their community.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

As I mentioned in chapter 1, CSP developed out of Gloria Ladson-Billings’s culturally relevant teaching and Geneva Gay’s culturally responsive teaching. In the 2012 article, “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice,” Django Paris (2012) proposes the term culturally sustaining pedagogy because that term:

Requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. (p. 95)
In CSP, teachers aid students in sustaining their own cultures and languages. It goes beyond just responding to or being relevant to the lives of diverse students. It helps students uphold their own cultures. However, Paris does not propose that dominant cultural ideas are useless. Instead, he argues that teachers need to give students access to the dominant culture also. In *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*, Alim and Paris write about how they saw the great need for CSP because in traditional schools, the purpose was to “forward the largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Traditional curricula force students to assimilate to a mainstream culture and they must leave their cultures outside the classroom. Instead, “CSP seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). CSP embraces students’ differences and utilizes them to improve schooling and society. The curriculum is “additive rather than subtractive” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Instead of operating out of a deficit mindset and urging students to “fix” what they are missing, teachers view the cultures that students bring to the classroom as strengths, which can be added to the curriculum to enhance it. CSP differs from culturally relevant teaching and culturally responsive teaching by “opening up spaces for students themselves to critique the ways that they might be—intentionally or not—reproducing discourses that marginalize members of our communities” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 11). Students play a role in CSP, by examining their own actions and working to end injustice. In the chapter, “Language and Culture as Sustenance,” from *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*, edited by Alim and Paris, Mary Bucholz, Dolores Inés Casillas, and Jin Sook Lee write that CSP draws in educators, “who seek social justice for their students of color, whose sense of self is constantly under attack from schooling practices and policies that racialize and thereby devalue, distort, and erase their language, culture, and identity” (Bucholz, Casillas, & Lee, 2017, p. 43). CSP can be a way to validate students’ cultures, increase academic
success, and encourage student activism. Through CSP, I can enable my African American students to find success, respect, and confidence in their schooling.

In Karen Roth’s (2017) chapter, “The Induction Seminar: Nurturing Culturally Sustaining Teaching and Learning in Rural Alaska Native Communities,” she writes about mentoring newly arrived, non-Native teachers in rural Alaska. Through an induction program, the new teachers learn about how to teach their Native Alaskan students in culturally sustaining ways. One way is through learning about the indigenous practices themselves and incorporating them into their lessons. They also are taught to relate their instruction to the everyday lives of their students. Instead of judging their students’ learning based on White, middle-class norms, teachers are encouraged to come up with innovative ways to assess student learning. The students are not told to give up their cultures when they come to school. Instead, teachers are taught to embrace their students’ cultures and incorporate them into their lessons.

Through CSP, teachers help students to sustain their cultures. Teachers also help students to notice and figure out how to fix injustices in their communities. CSP creates a space for students to empower themselves because it values their cultures and emboldens them to act to right the world.

Conclusion

I want for classical education to be modified to create a space for African American students to empower themselves. As Shor wrote in his 1992 book, *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*, “The students need a challenging education that empowers them as thinkers, communicators, and citizens” (Shor, 1992, p. 10). An empowering education challenges students. It grows them as thinkers. It makes them eloquent writers and speakers. It enables them to be thoughtful, committed citizens.

In this chapter, I speculated on what a culturally empowering pedagogy would be like. In the previous sections, I have discussed the basic tenets of culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. I envision culturally
empowering pedagogy as being a combination of all three pedagogies and having these aims: To give students confidence in themselves and their cultures, to recognize that there is injustice in the world and students have the power to fight it, and to know that they can and will succeed in school. A culturally empowering pedagogy makes students stronger. It enables them to make connections between the curriculum at school and their own cultures and lives. It liberates them.

In the next chapter, I will illuminate how classical education can be culturally empowering for African American students. I will discuss the meanings that I made from my theoretical dissertation. I will also describe ways that educators can modify classical education so that it creates a space for African American students to empower themselves.
CHAPTER 6
CREATING CULTURALLY EMPOWERING PEDAGOGY
FOR CLASSICAL EDUCATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they
find it and make it better, but the instruction so far given Negroes in colleges and universities has
worked to the contrary.

_Carter G. Woodson, The Mis-Education of the Negro_

In this dissertation, I have speculated on how to make classical education more culturally
empowering for African American students. I have developed the idea of culturally empowering
pedagogy out of culturally relevant, responsive, sustaining pedagogies. Together these three
pedagogies create an education that is empowering for African American students.

In the first five chapters, I reflected on my own schooling and teaching experiences. I
then examined classical education and contrasted it with progressive education. Next, I reflected
on the miseducation of Black Americans. Black people have a long history of seeking education
for liberation. Instead, schools have put constraints on their curiosity and learning, and educators
have tried to fit Black students into middle-class, White American molds, where Black students
are not allowed to celebrate their cultures and feel valued as people. In Chapter 4, I profiled the
educational journeys of four prominent African American scholars: Marva Collins, W. E. B. Du
Bois, August Wilson, and Carter G. Woodson. By studying their journeys, I discovered some
common themes that gave insight into how they used classic works to guide their own
professional lives. In Chapter 5, I looked at how teaching classical education to African American
students is a form of culturally contested pedagogy and culturally irrelevant pedagogy. I
speculated on how educators could use the approaches of culturally relevant pedagogy and
culturally responsive teaching to turn classical education into a liberating education for African
American students.
In this chapter, I illuminate ways to create culturally empowering pedagogy for classical education for African American students: (1) Classical education provides a window through which African American students can position their experiences and struggles in larger contexts. (2) When African American students do not see themselves in the curriculum, they feel that their cultures and experiences are not valued in the official knowledge of the school, which becomes the null curriculum (Eisner, 1985) that is detrimental to their Black existence. (3) Classical education should be used to liberate African American students rather than oppress them, since African Americans have a legacy of seeking education for liberation. (4) To make classical education culturally relevant and sustaining for African American students, we need to find ways to teach their cultural heritages, legacies, traditions, and histories. We need to create a space for African American students to heal from their tragic loss and all forms of oppression they experience at home, in the community, and at school. (5) To make classical education culturally relevant and sustaining, we need to honor African American students’ funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and the cultural roots of their learning styles (Hale-Benson, 1986). (6) Based upon the experiences of prominent African Americans, we should find ways to use classic literature and ancient world history to empower African American students. (7) To develop culturally empowering pedagogy for the classical education for African American students, White teachers need to critically examine who they were and how they have become who they are as teachers, challenge their biases, recognize their cultural blindness, and defy internal and external racism. (8) To develop culturally empowering pedagogy for the classical education for African American students, teachers should work with other educational workers, such as educators, administrators, parents, students, community workers, and policy makers, to create a culturally inspiring and liberating learning environment, where all African American students have equal opportunity to reach their highest potential (Walker, 1996).
Classical Education as a Window

Classical education provides a window through which African American students can position their experiences and struggles in larger contexts. In her 2016 book, *African Americans and the Classics: Antiquity, Abolition and Activism*, Margaret Malamud discusses how African Americans and other abolitionists used the classics to fight for freedom for Blacks. Malamud (2016) writes, “African Americans and their supporters boldly staked their own claims to the classical world, using texts, ideas, and images of ancient Greece and Rome in order to establish their authority in debates about slavery, race, education, and politics” (p. 16). They used the world of the classics to strengthen their anti-slavery arguments. At that time, their opponents also used the classics. According to Malamud (2016), “Abolitionists, for example, were well aware that proslavery advocates embraced classical precedents for slavery, so they too scoured Antiquity to garner support for their antislavery position” (p. 17). Abolitionists did not decide that because those, who supported slavery, were using the classics to fight for slavery, that they would stay away from the classics. Instead, they looked for arguments in the classics that would be against slavery.

Abolitionists and African Americans used the classics as a weapon because the classics carried much reverence. Malamud (2016) writes, “Knowledge of the classical past offered cultural capital: demonstrating knowledge of the classical world was an important means by which Americans—black and white—could stake a claim to being virtuous, educated and patriotic” (p. 17). If African Americans knew the classical world, then they were said to be cultured in the eyes of most Americans. Because knowing the classical world was so respected in society, African Americans would claim to be Greek and Roman cultural heirs. According to Malamud (2016):

It may seem odd and even counterintuitive that free African Americans and their abolitionist supporters would frequently embrace the unabashedly slaveowning cultures of Greece and Rome and consciously and persistently cast themselves as their cultural
and moral heirs. . . the legacy of Antiquity constituted real cultural capital, and African American activists had every incentive to appropriate, subvert, and adapt it. (p. 134)

They strengthened their anti-slavery arguments with ancient Greek and Roman allusions. They made the classical world work for them.

Even in our contemporary world, African American students can use classical education as a window to view other people’s struggles. By reading stories outside of their culture, they can identify with the characters. Malamud writes about how Ralph Ellison uses the story of Odysseus to inspire his 1952 work, *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s protagonist faces similar obstacles to the ones Odysseus faces in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Malamud (2016) writes, “*Invisible Man* is an example of an emancipated reading of the Classics: of an African American author able to use the Classics without in any sense being in thrall to them” (p. 243). Ralph Ellison could use the *Odyssey* as a window to view the struggles of another person. Then he wrote a novel set in his own culture and readers would be able to identify with his protagonist in a new way. Likewise, African American students can use classical education as a window to view another person’s struggles and identify with them.

**Null Curriculum for African American Students in Classical Education**

When African American students do not see themselves in the curriculum, they feel that their cultures and experiences are not valued in the official knowledge of the school, which becomes the null curriculum (Eisner, 1985) that is detrimental to their Black existence. Eisner (1985) defined null curriculum as the information that schools do not teach or knowledge that is left out of the curriculum. For African American students studying classical education, often they cannot identify with much of the curriculum unless the teacher modifies the curriculum to include ancient Africa or other parts of their culture. Delpit warned against leaving out the culture that students bring to the classroom, by saying, “If the curriculum we use to teach our children does not connect in positive ways to the culture young people bring to school, it is doomed to failure” (Delpit, 2012, p. 21). Delpit argued that teachers needed to connect the culture of their students to
the curriculum in affirmative ways. Likewise, Ladson-Billings argued for teachers to include students’ experiences in the curriculum, by writing, “Students’ real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the ‘official’ curriculum” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 127). If teachers do not include student experience in the lesson, then the message that they are sending to the students is that their experiences do not matter, which has negative consequences for students.

Classical education does not have to be separate from the African American experience. In many ways, ancient Africa is the root of the classics. According to Van Sertima (1990/1995):

The first Europeans, the Greeks, were in awe of the Africans. They could not understand how anyone had gone that far. Greece had its genius, but nothing compared to what the Egyptians had achieved. The African had reached levels that startled the Greeks’ levels in astronomy, in mathematics. His literature, his philosophy startled them. They were to feed on that as they came in even as I now, out of my shattered world have had to go to Europe to be educated, then did the great Europeans come to Africa to be educated. (p. 91)

Ancient Africans had amazing accomplishments that astonished the ancient Greeks. Greeks went to Africa to be educated. However, that high opinion changed. Van Sertima (1990/1995) wrote, “it was not until around the 1830s that Europeans, feeling guilt about their enslavement of the Africans, decided to try and prove that the African had nothing to do with civilization” (p. 91). Europeans had enslaved Africans, so to assuage their guilt, they pretended that Africans were not an accomplished people. Teachers of classical education should teach ancient history of Africa to show African American students that their culture is part of classical education and to remind all students of the amazing accomplishments of African people.

Making Classical Education for the Liberation of African American Students

Classical education should be used to liberate African American students rather than oppress them, since African Americans have a legacy of seeking education for liberation. Mwalimu J. Shujaa differentiated between schooling and education in the African American
community, by saying, “Schooling is a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society’s existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements” (Shujaa, 1994, p. 15; emphasis in original). Schools were first designed to train workers for factories and thus continue the societal power hierarchies. Exclusive private schools or home tutors educated the future bosses and factory owners. Public schools trained the future factory workers. However, as Shujaa (1994) wrote, “Education, in contrast to schooling, is the process of transmitting from one generation to the next knowledge of the values, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs, and all things that give a particular cultural orientation its uniqueness” (p. 15). Shujaa argued that in education one generation passes on their culture to the next. He called for African Americans to share their cultural values with the next generation. However, as a White teacher, I do not have an African American culture to share with my students. I need to discover how to teach classical education for the liberation of African Americans without sharing a culture with them.

Classical education has been used by some people with Western European heritage to extol their own cultures. Shujaa criticizes some powerful members of American society, by saying:

These people, over the generations, have used societal institutions and resources to glorify their Western European cultural heritage while, at the same time, devaluing through processes of omission, distortion, and misrepresentation knowledge centered in the cultures of others in the same society who do not trace their origins to Western Europe. African-Americans are among those “other” groups that are systematically oppressed through institutionalized relations of power and resource distribution based on race. (Shujaa, 1994, p. 31)

While praising their own heritage, they degraded other cultural groups. They praised classical education and focused on ancient Greece and Rome, Shakespeare, Western Europe. They gave power to other people who looked like them.
Some African Americans tried to fight their way into this elite echelon by learning Greek or Latin. They did so to prove their intelligence, as Malamud (2016) writes, “At the most basic level, a knowledge of classical languages refuted charges of racial inferiority—many whites doubted African Americans’ rational capacity, and their definition of rational capacity included the ability to learn Greek and Latin” (p. 17). If an African American could learn such a language as Greek, that proved his/her intelligence to racist Whites.

However, an African American does not have to learn Greek or Latin to know classical education as a liberating force. All one needs to do is go back to ancient African history. According to Van Sertima (1990/1995), “You cannot imagine how profound is the contribution of Africa in early times to the European civilization” (p. 95). Without the influence of ancient Africans, early Europeans would probably have not made the advancements that they did.

Also, if students study ancient Africa, then they realize that civilizations rise and fall. According to Gordon (1994):

One of the many assets of studying African history and civilization is that Eurocentric Anglo history is put into perspective. It becomes the record of only one of many vast, rich, and powerful civilizations in the history of the world, one that rose and one that will no doubt inevitably fall to yet another even more powerful civilization in due time. (p. 63)

Too many history books begin with ancient Europe when they should go back further to ancient Africa and China. Instead of centering history around the Western European history, it should be expanded to include more diverse histories. When African Americans learn about ancient Africa, then their education is more liberating.

Finding Ways to Teach Cultural Heritages, Legacies, Traditions, and Histories

To make classical education culturally relevant and sustaining for African American students, we need to find ways to teach their cultural heritages, legacies, traditions, and histories. We need to create a space for African American students to heal from their tragic loss and all forms of
oppression they experience at home, in the community, and at school. When John Henrik Clarke was a young man in Columbus, Georgia, he asked a White lawyer to lend him a book about African history, and the lawyer replied that Clarke came from a people with no history. Clarke knew that the lawyer could not possibly be correct, but he did not know where to find any answers. He happened upon an essay by Arthur Schomburg, called “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” and in this essay, he discovered that he came “from a people who had a long and honorable history, one that pre-dated the existence of Europe. This knowledge surged through my mind like a liberating force” (Clarke, 1990/1995, p. 52). Clarke felt freer after learning this history of his people. This is the same feeling of liberation that I want for my African American students. To give them that sense of freedom, I need to find ways to teach their cultural heritages, legacies, traditions, and histories.

In many schools, African American culture is not taught. As Delpit (2012) wrote, “Typical university curricula leave out the contributions of people of color to American culture, except in special courses in African American studies, thus marginalizing both the students and the information” (p. 182). As mentioned earlier, when African American culture is the null curriculum (Eisner, 1985) in the classroom, African American students feel marginalized. As a teacher of African American students, I need to help them reclaim their cultural identity. According to Gordon (1994), “Reclaiming one’s culture (cultural history and knowledge) is an essential aspect of an authentic being” (pp. 67-68). By learning about their history and cultural knowledge, my African American students will be more authentically themselves.

A curriculum with African American history and content has a couple aims. According to Nobles (1990/1995):

A curricula infused with African and African-American content must systematically guide the transmission of information and knowledge while simultaneously reinforcing in African-American students the desire to learn and encouraging the adoption of behaviors and attitudes consistent with the historical excellence of African people” (p. 10).
Students need to learn about African culture and history. They also need to learn the joy of learning. Nobles also believed that they need to be encouraged to form habits that will lead to excellence, as many African people have used those attitudes and behaviors for success in the past. One of the steps towards infusing the school curriculum with African and African American content is to “provide educators with the skills and attitudes (i.e., feelings and beliefs) that culturally diverse children can learn and are worth every effort, every sacrifice and deserve every chance to develop their minds and human potential” (Nobles, 1990/1995, p. 19). If the teachers do not believe that their African American students can succeed, then they will not work as hard. Also, people who know African achievements and accomplishments must share that knowledge and according to Cole (1990/1995):

That teaching has to create a broader interest in a variety of outlets so that we reach far beyond Black History Month and a ritualized roll call of our heroes. We must create the method and the means of weaving African and African American content into the fabric of world discourse and action. (p. 30)

African American students should not only learn about African Americans during one month of the year, and they should also not only learn about the accomplishments of a few. Instead, African American history and culture should be part of everyday curriculum.

Cole (1990/1995) asks the rhetorical question: “Why is it so hard to see that our children need to know that they are a great part of a long and continuous movement of ideas, of creativity, of passion, and of power?” (p. 31). By learning about the history of their people, African American students can be empowered by the legacies and creativity of the people of their culture. Cole (1990/1995) wrote, “To deny our African-American children a consciousness of themselves, through their people, is to cripple them psychologically and emotionally forever” (p. 30). Without that knowledge of their culture, African American students would not feel empowered. Nobles agreed with Cole about the importance of the African culture. According to Nobles (1990/1995), “When African people look honestly at our history regarding culture, what we in fact see is that
culture has always been the hidden key to our educational excellence and our accomplishments in civilization” (p. 16). African Americans, who embraced their cultures, had much success in academics, the arts, entertainment, and other industries. African American students need to be taught their culture, so that they can achieve excellence in those arenas also. According to Edelin (1990/1995), “The key to unlocking the genius of our children, tapping into that talent bank which is so evident and glorious in arenas outside the classroom, is to be found in the relationship of curriculum to cultural identity” (p. 37). When African Americans learn about their culture, then they can be empowered in their cultural identities. They can tap into the talent and genius that is inside of them.

Learning African content does not just benefit African Americans. It benefits students from every background. Cole (1990/1995) wrote, “all worlds will benefit when the light of truth is focused on the so-called ‘Dark Continent,’ and when the country that is now ours too, finally comes to understand that we are perhaps one of its most important expressions of identity” (p. 30). Like Carter G. Woodson, Cole believed that all people should learn Black history and gain an appreciation for Black people. By learning about African American history, all students could appreciate African Americans’ contributions more. Another reason to learn about African American history is so that we can be prepared for the future. One of the roles of history is “to tell people where they still must go and what they still must be” (Clarke, 1990/1995, p. 59). By learning about African American history, students gain a better understanding of where they need to go in the future and what types of people they should be.

Honoring Funds of Knowledge and Cultural Roots of Learning Styles

To make classical education culturally relevant and sustaining, we need to honor African American students’ funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and the cultural roots of their learning styles (Hale-Benson, 1986). As teachers, we need to honor the funds of knowledge that students bring to the classroom. Moll et al. (1992) defined funds of knowledge as the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or
individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). Students do come into the classroom empty-handed and empty-headed. Instead, they arrive with knowledge gained from their families and communities. Souto-Manning (2018) writes, “As teachers committed to culturally relevant teaching, we must identify, cultivate, leverage, and sustain minoritized students’, families’, and communities’ funds of knowledge” (p. 41). Teachers need to seek out the knowledge that students bring. They can ask questions that will give students an opportunity to share their knowledge. They also need to draw students’ attention to the knowledge that they possess. Some students may lack confidence in their knowledge and a teacher can encourage them. Teachers should also honor the funds of knowledge in families and communities.

Beyond honoring funds of knowledge, teachers should also honor the specific learning styles of African American students. As Hale-Benson (1986) wrote, Black children “need an educational system that recognizes their strengths, their abilities, and their culture and that incorporates them into the learning process” (p. 4). Black students would learn better in a system that recognizes their culture, talents, and abilities and uses them in the curriculum.

In many schools, there is a mismatch between the African American students and the teachers and school environment. Since many teachers are White females, they equate White female culture with school success. Hale (1994) wrote, “When they encounter African American children, educators have no prism for seeing the wealth of experiences and abilities these children bring to school” (p. 9). The teachers do not recognize the gifts and talents that African American children bring to school because they differ from the abilities that White children bring. This can lead to many issues. According to Hale (1994):

At the root of the achievement and disciplinary difficulties of African American children are a lack of understanding on the part of educators of African American culture and child rearing and a lack of recognition of the mismatch between this culture and European American culture of the school. (p. 165)
Teachers do not understand the African American culture and do not realize that there is a discrepancy between the school culture and the African American culture. Schools often cater to the White middle-class and they need to become more aware of their students’ different cultural groups:

- It is critical that schools become more sensitive to ethnic and cultural groups that do not conform to the white middle-income model that the schools are prepared to serve. Only when members of the helping professions demystify African American culture will solutions be found to the dilemma of achieving equal educational outcomes for African American children. (Hale, 1994, p. 168)

Hale argued that African American students would not find success in school until educators learned more about Black culture and how to teach Black students. She wrote that if teachers were to poll Black parents, they would learn what they desire in the education of their children. Black parents want to “correct the compartmentalizing of Black people into the Negro History corner of the classroom. They want to see the Black experience integrated into songs, arithmetic problems, science experiments, arts and crafts activities, social studies, and dance forms” (Hale-Benson, 1986, p. 156). Black culture should be part of many aspects of the school day. It can be integrated into many different content areas. Also, they “want the political situation of Black people to be conveyed in the educative process through attention given to helping their children develop an alternative frame of reference, positive self-concepts, a Black identity, and a commitment to their people” (Hale-Benson, 1986, p. 157). Parents want Black children to learn confidence in themselves and their culture, to face prejudice secure in their own self-worth, to know what it means to be a Black person, and to be devoted to their culture and people.

To create such a powerful education for African American students, teachers need to focus on several facets. The first is academic rigor. According to Hale-Benson (1986):
Black children must be excellent. If history has taught any reality to the Afro-American community, it is that Black people have had to excel over white people in every field of endeavor in order to be given an equal opportunity. (p. 157; emphasis in original) Teachers must have high expectations for their African American students, and they must empower them to strive for excellence.

Also, communication is a huge part of the African American culture. As Hale (1994) wrote, “The African America culture emphasizes a different aspect of language—it is not what you say, but how you say it, that is important. That is, the African American culture emphasizes charismatic and stylistic uses of language” (p. 8). Teachers should recognize and praise how students give their answers and not just give feedback on the content. According to Hale (1994), “The African American child grows up in an environment that encourages extemporaneous speaking, memory development, musical genius, and oratorical flair” (p. 9). This is important for teachers to know, so that they can allow time for students to express themselves and show creativity. In fact, Hale-Benson (1986) gives this advice for teachers: “The teacher should encourage the children to talk conversationally, in recitation, and creatively” (p. 165). Teachers should give students opportunities to speak because that will give many African American students a chance to shine in the classroom and it will also allow them to practice those skills.

Another aspect of teaching Black children well is respect. Hale-Benson (1986) wrote, “The teacher must understand and respect Black culture and should respect and work well with parents, regarding them as partners in educating the child” (p. 167). Without respect of Black culture, the child, and the parents, the teacher cannot teach the child well.

Finally, the teacher should remember that African American children “are required to master two divergent cultures in order to achieve upward mobility in school and the workplace—the African American culture and the European American culture” (Hale, 1994, p. 191). Black children have challenges that they must navigate. To fit in with their peers, they need to master Black culture, but to succeed in school and work, they often must master White culture as well.
Knowing that their African American students are learning how to navigate both worlds will bring understanding to teachers and help them to teach the students with more care and consideration.

Using Classic Literature and World History to Empower African American Students

Based upon the experiences of prominent African Americans, we should find ways to use classic literature and ancient world history to empower African American students. The four prominent African Americans that I profiled in Chapter 4 all used classic literature to educate themselves. Margaret Malamud writes that African Americans and abolitionists used the classics as well. According to Malamud (2016), “knowledge of the Classics was a powerful weapon and tool for resistance—as improbable as that might seem now—when wielded by activists committed to the abolition of slavery and the end of the social and economic oppression of free blacks” (p. 16). The abolitionists used classical references to strengthen their arguments against slavery.

In addition to the classics, ancient history is a powerful tool for the empowerment of African American students. As Clarke (1990/1995) wrote, “African history is part of world history. It is a very old part and it is a very important part. There is no way to understand world history without an understanding of African history” (p. 111). African American students can feel empowered learning about African history, which is a vital part of world history. In fact, according to Clarke (1990/1995):

Most of what we now call world history is only the history of the first and second rise of Europe. The Europeans are not yet willing to acknowledge that the world did not wait in darkness for them to bring the light, and that the history of Africa was already old when Europe was born. (p. 113)

If African Americans learn that Africa was already old when Europe was born, they can feel empowered in their proud and accomplished history.
Confronting Biases, Cultural Blindness, and Internal and External Racism

To develop culturally empowering pedagogy for the classical education for African American students, White teachers need to critically examine who they were and how they have become who they are as teachers and challenge their biases, recognize their cultural blindness, and defy internal and external racism. According to Delpit (2012):

When we educators look out at a classroom of black faces, we must understand that we are looking at children at least as brilliant as those from any well-to-do white community.

If we do not recognize the brilliance before us, we cannot help but carry on the stereotypic societal views that these children are somehow damaged goods and that they cannot be expected to succeed. (p. 5)

White teachers need to examine their own biases. As Delpit wrote, we need to believe that Black children are just as smart and talented as any well-to-do White children. If we do not believe this, then we will probably give up on them and not expect for them to achieve.

African American students face prejudice and racism in schools. Bettina L. Love (2019) writes, “As educators, we must accept that schools are spaces of Whiteness, White rage, and disempowerment. We cannot fall into narratives of racial progress that romanticize ‘how far we’ve come’ or suggest that success come from darks being more like Whites” (p. 40). In schools, teachers communicate to Black students that they will be more successful if they act more White. White educators need to realize that this is the message that Black students are hearing. Love writes that we need to realize that schools perpetuate White dominance and disempower Black students. As a White educator, I need to fight against White dominance and disempowerment of Black students in schools.

Love calls out racism as the precursor of a myriad of societal problems, including failing schools, by writing:

Education is not the antecedent of failing schools, poverty, homelessness, police brutality, and/or crime. Racism is; racism that is built on centuries of ideas that seek to
confuse and manipulate we who are dark into never mattering to one another or this country. (Love, 2019, p. 41)

Love writes that racism is formed from centuries of ideas that communicate to people that Black people do not matter to each other and this nation. Racism tells that Black people are not important. When reading the word, “matter,” I think about Kid President’s joke/inspirational message in his YouTube video, A Pep Talk to Teachers and Students!: “You’re here. You take up space. You matter” (SoulPancake, 2013, 0:30). Kid President says that if you take up space, you matter, and of course all people matter. Of course, Black people matter. However, racism communicates the message that Black people do not matter, and as teachers, we need to fight against this racism in ourselves, our schools, and the larger society.

Removing ourselves of biases and racism requires work. As Delpit (2006) wrote, “If we are to successfully educate all of our children, we must work to remove the blinders built of stereotypes, monocultural institutional methodologies, ignorance, social distance, biased research, and racism” (p. 182). The blinders that we wear keep us from having high expectations for our African American students and believing in them. We remove them by knowing that they exist and working to change our mindsets.

We need to remove our blinders in our interactions with our students and in our interactions with their families. As Li (2006) wrote, “Teachers need to be aware of their cultural biases and positioning when they seek to understand diverse points of view from parents and families” (p. 212). If we do not actively get rid of our biases, cultural blindness, and racism, then we are not as open to suggestions and feedback from our students and their families. Both of those groups have insights that are useful to teachers, and we need to be receptive to hearing them.

Finally, as White teachers, we need to fight external racism from other people. We cannot allow people to spread racist rhetoric without calling them out on it. In some settings, our voices
might be the ones heard and listened to, so we need to use them on the behalf of our students and their families.

**Working Together to Empower African American Students**

To develop culturally empowering pedagogy for the classical education for African American students, the teachers should work with other educational workers, such as educators, administrators, parents, students, community workers, and policy makers, to create a culturally inspiring and liberating learning environment, where all African American students have equal opportunity to reach their highest potential (Walker, 1996). As Edelin (1990/1995) wrote, “Effective learning environments begin with the highest expectations and vision of what our group and our children can be; they involve parents, families, and the community intimately in their work” (p. 42). We need to start with high expectations for our students and we need to involve students, their parents, families, and communities in reaching those high expectations. Too often as a teacher, I try to teach alone. When I enter into partnership with the families of my students, then my students can achieve at higher levels because their families and I are united in helping them succeed.

One important aspect of working together is listening. As Hammond (2015) writes, “Listening communicates a respect for and an interest in the student’s contributions” (p. 77). When teachers listen to students, we show that we respect them, and we are attentive to what they can impart to the class discussion. It is also vital to listen to parents, families, and communities. According to Li (2006):

- An understanding of the politics of difference—the underlying power relationships between the teachers and schools, and the families and communities—is crucial for successful minority education. This kind of understanding requires teachers, who are in a more powerful position, to do a special kind of listening to the parents’ and community’s voices—to see from the parents’ point of view. (p. 212)
In the school setting, the teacher has power, and the teacher needs to look at situations from the parents’ perspective. By listening well and looking through the parents’ eyes, the teacher can see the situation more clearly and will probably gain a better understanding.

Also, teachers need to change their perspectives on students and their families. According to Souto-Manning (2018), “As teachers, we have to stop seeing students through the lenses of ‘you poor dear’ and view them through an assets-based lens, learning from and with students, their families, and their communities, and working together for academic excellence” (p. 25). A teacher can be too sympathetic and lower his/her expectations for students. Instead, we need to realize that students have strengths that they bring with them to school, and we have much that we can learn from our students, their families and their communities. Together, we can build an empowering classical education for African American students.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have illuminated ways to build an empowering classical education for African American students. I recognize that classical education can provide a window through which African American students can position their experiences and struggles in larger contexts. Also, I understand that when African American students do not see themselves in the curriculum, they feel that their cultures and experiences are not valued in the official knowledge of the school, which becomes the null curriculum (Eisner, 1985) that is detrimental to their Black existence. I argue that classical education should be used to liberate African American students rather than oppress them, since African Americans have a legacy of seeking education for liberation. To make classical education culturally relevant and sustaining for African American students, we need to find ways to teach their cultural heritages, legacies, traditions, and histories, and we need to honor African American students’ funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and the cultural roots of their learning styles (Hale-Benson, 1986). As educators, we need to create a space for African American students to heal from their tragic loss and all forms of oppression they experience at home, in the community, and at school. Based upon the experiences of prominent African
Americans, we should find ways to use classic literature and ancient world history to empower African American students. To develop culturally empowering pedagogy for the classical education for African American students, White teachers need to critically examine who they were and how they have become who they are as teachers and challenge their biases, recognize their cultural blindness, and defy internal and external racism and should work with other educational workers, such as educators, administrators, parents, students, community workers, and policy makers, to create a culturally inspiring and liberating learning environment, where all African American students have equal opportunity to reach their highest potential (Walker, 1996). By transforming classical education through a culturally empowering pedagogy, we can work to end the miseducation of African American students. We can create a space in which African American students can empower themselves.
AFTERWORD

I started working on this dissertation in the spring of 2019. Since beginning this dissertation, many events have happened: A global pandemic, the closing of school buildings, the transition to virtual learning, the move to hybrid learning, and the return to the classroom with masks, desk shields, and physical distancing. On a personal note, my job changed as well. I became a fifth-grade classroom teacher. Now instead of working with all the students in kindergarten through fifth grade, I focus on one grade-level, and I have a homeroom class.

This move to fifth grade allows me to try out some of the lessons that I have learned through writing this dissertation with one class. After reading about the communication styles of African American children (Hale-Benson, 1986), I practiced letting my students comment and give feedback while students sharing their journal prompts during our morning meeting. Ordinarily, I would have reminded them on how to be a respectful audience (listening in silence with their eyes on the speaker), but after reading Janice Hale-Benson’s work, I realized that my interpretation of a polite audience comes out of my White culture and the African American audience shows their appreciation by talking and encouraging as the speaker shares. By knowing more about African American learning styles, I can modify my instruction to teach them better.

Over the past couple years, my school administrators have talked about wanting to bring some of the classical curriculum back into the classroom. As a school, we are still under tremendous pressure to do well on standardized tests. Our school leadership urges the teachers to plan effective lessons and cover all the standards. Classical education is a lower priority than teaching the standards. However, regardless of what the official school curriculum is, I can use what I have learned through this dissertation to teach my students in a culturally inspiring way.

One of the dilemmas inherent in classical education for African American students is that the two cultures are irrelevant. Much of classical education is simply not relevant to African American students. As I have explored throughout this dissertation, the classical curriculum can be modified to fix this issue. African classics can be incorporated into the classical curriculum to
bring relevance to African American students. Also, African history and culture can be added to
the curriculum as well. Classical education can be taught in a way that creates space for African
American students to empower themselves.

However, critics would still argue that classical education is not important or useful for
African American students. Like W. E. B. Du Bois and Marva Collins, I argue that classical
education is useful for African American students. No form of education should be off-limits to
any group of students. Through classical education, African American students can gain the
foundation that they need for their adult and professional lives.

Throughout my dissertation journey, my committee asked me to consider my contribution
to the field of curriculum studies. I often question my own influence. As one teacher, I have
control over what goes on in my classroom. I can choose to use culturally empowering pedagogy
to teach my students, and it will impact that one group of students. As a colleague, I can
encourage my co-workers to use culturally empowering strategies as well, and then it will spread
to other classrooms. If my students show growth in their learning, then my administrators would
be extremely eager to learn about the strategies that I use in my classroom, and then it could
potentially extend to the whole school. However, what our students need is an education that
focuses on preparing them for life and not for passing a standardized test. As an educator, I feel
like there is little that I can do to create systemic change in the United States educational system
or even to create change in my own school. However, just because I doubt my impact does not
mean that I need to stop trying. By implementing the strategies that I learned through my
dissertation, I can work to create a space for my African American students to empower
themselves.

By writing this dissertation, I have contributed to the field of curriculum studies. I have
added to the conversation of African American students and classical education. I have
illuminated ways that classical education can be modified to be an educational model, in which
African American students can find liberation. By using the strategies that I outlined in Chapter 6,
educators can create a space in classical education in which African American students can empower themselves.
REFERENCES


