



GHOLDY MUHAMMAD

*Cultivating
Genius*

AN EQUITY FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURALLY AND
HISTORICALLY RESPONSIVE LITERACY

FOREWORD BY BETTINA L. LOVE



SCHOLASTIC

“*Cultivating Genius* is a timely, important, and educator-friendly book that is needed now more than ever before. One cannot fully engage the power of what is available through **culturally responsive lesson planning** without applying Dr. Muhammad’s brilliant and innovative framework. This practical guide illuminates and translates theory in ways that will help educators bring about the change needed in literacy classrooms—change that culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies promise. In a sentence: **This is the book we in the teacher education literacy field have been waiting for.**”

—**Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz**, Associate Professor of English Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

“Gholdy Muhammad has written a truly brilliant, necessarily bold, and absolutely beautiful book! From her focus on utilizing a Historically Responsive Literacy framework to her recognition of historical and contemporary embodiments of Black Excellence, Black Joy, and Black Love, ***Cultivating Genius* advocates for educational equity, transformation, and engaged teaching that cultivates the genius of our students. What a read!**”

—**Valerie Kinloch**, Renée and Richard Goldman Dean of the University of Pittsburgh School, University of Pittsburgh, School of Education

“Dr. Gholdy Muhammad has her ear attuned to the pulsing needs of youth of color and their teachers. She masterfully brings theory to vibrant life in classrooms, providing educators with a framework that turns to history to guide precisely the rich, responsive, and multifaceted literacy learning we urgently need in the present. In short, Dr. Muhammad’s concept of Historically Responsive Literacies is a game changer in literacy education.”

—**Elizabeth Dutro**, Professor, Literacy Studies Chair, Literacy Studies Program School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder

“*Cultivating Genius* is about (re)remembering that **equity and excellence have always been the hallmark of literacy traditions of Black and Brown peoples**. It is about (re)storying the models for literacy teaching and learning in ways that (re)mind us all that identity, skills, criticality, and intellect have always been the foundation of African American literacy teaching. Muhammad brilliantly writes an important (re)remembering of who we are and our ways of being literate, one that puts culture and community at the very heart of learning and teaching. That is where equity and excellence reside. *Cultivating Genius* (re)members that truth. And if equity and justice are to be attainable goals, we must (re)member it, too.”

—**Cynthia B. Dillard, Ph.D. (Nana Mansa II of Mpeasem, Ghana, West Africa)**, Mary Frances Early Professor of Teacher Education, University of Georgia

“*Cultivating Genius* is a rare glimpse into the future. It is at once a **framework for advancing equity** in literacy education and a needed **treatment for undoing the historical ills of racial injustice**. It is smart and wonderfully clear. This book offers the perfect blueprint for reimagining the possibilities of the classroom.”

—**David E. Kirkland**, Professor, Urban Education at New York University, Executive Director, New York University, Metro Center

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To Al Mujib (*The Responsive*).

I dedicate this book to my mothers:
Maria, Ajile, Evelyn, and Bernice.

And to my Baba.

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What Is Historically Responsive Literacy?



It has been most happily said, by one of the greatest of modern philosophers, that “Knowledge is power;” and never has the excellency of its possession been doubted by the candid and liberal; but education must begin in youth, in order to furnish men of erudition. Our youth are the men of a coming age; and who can calculate the importance of competent instruction in the development of their powers, and in the formation of their minds. How many millions are ruined in their early days, for the want of good instruction! Yes! We need to be constantly reminded of the power of education, right or wrong, thorough or superficial, controlled or slighted—to make or ruin the hopes of our country; and in reference to this subject, it has been said, with propriety, that a man cannot leave his country a better legacy than a well-educated family.

—Robert Sears

This stirring quote by Robert Sears, a White contributor who often critiqued the current state of politics and education in the United States, was originally published July 8, 1837, in *The Colored American* newspaper. Sears argued that a quality education and quality of life are intertwined human rights and must be both excellent and powerful. For decades, communities of color especially have been resisting wrongful, deficit-based education. Indeed, we have worked to name and describe the education we deserve to avoid the ruin of poor education.

Cultural Theories and Models

From her work with successful teachers of African American students, Gloria Ladson-Billings coined the term *culturally relevant education*. Following the ancestors' examples, Ladson-Billings named and described the type of education African American students deserved. She defined culturally relevant education as a “theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement, but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (1995, p. 469). At this time, culturally relevant education was seen as a theory for reframing education to not only structure learning to be more identity-centered, but also to focus on sociopolitical learning in student achievement.

Marginalization and Other Challenges

The need for culturally relevant education stemmed from the multiple ways Black children and other youth with “kindred struggles” (Johnston, D’Andrea Montalbano & Kirkland, 2017) were marginalized and treated poorly in schools. In fact, when I examined research related to the literacy development of Black girls and boys over the past 25 years, I (along with co-researchers) found the following:

- The nation’s educators still struggle with how to advance the literacy development of Black boys and girls.
- The reading performance of middle and high school-aged Black children has remained relatively flat since the 1980s due to instruction and other factors.
- Black girls are often negatively represented in and out of schools, and the focus has been on their behavior, not their academic aptitude.
- Black girls are among the highest-growing populations of incarcerated youth.
- There are several influences shaping their academic trajectories in the categories of instructional (skills and strategies), sociocultural (home environment and access to economic, human, and

- community resources), and personal (confidence, individual attributes) factors.
- Instruction is largely ahistorical—that is, the ways people of color have excelled in literacy historically are absent from the ways educators engage them in instruction today (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016).

Additionally, there is a growing mismatch of incoming teachers and students. Teachers are largely White, female, and monolingual, while classrooms are increasingly multilingual and multi-ethnic (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). This does not mean that these teachers cannot teach Black and Brown students excellently, but it means that work needs to be done to learn and respond to the social and cultural lives of students.

This work is often beyond what most teacher preparation programs offer. Such programs generally do not ground teacher preparation in Black or cultural studies. Nor do most teacher preparation programs centralize anti-racism, anti-oppression, or learning about Black educational history or Black learning theorists. In fact, we too often see “diversity” or “multicultural” classes as isolated efforts rather than grounding entire programs in intersectionality as we see in Black and cultural studies programs. Urban education courses will have classes related to poverty before having a class centered on Black and Brown excellence. Ironically, an urban education class on poverty doesn’t capture the current nature of urban cities across the U.S. as many people of color are being pushed out of urban areas due to gentrification. If we as a nation are struggling to “get it right” with Black and Brown student populations, shouldn’t we ground teacher preparation in the essence of Black and cultural learning theories and practices? Instead, again and again, I find that curricular mandates in our nation’s largest school districts are often written and guided by Whiteness and lack education that teaches youth to be socially and politically conscious beings—which are intelligences that they need to survive and thrive during and after K–12 education (Love, 2019).

Deficit Language

Another problem that led to the need for culturally relevant education is the deficit language surrounding the lives of children of color— language such as *at risk*, *defiant*, and *disadvantaged*. More recent policies and programs such as Response to Intervention continue to perpetuate inadequate thinking about young people of color, giving them labels such as “red group” or “tier 3.” These labels also connect to naming youth as “non-readers,” or “struggling readers.” In a statement of culturally responsive education, Johnston, D’Andrea Montalbano & Kirkland (2017) stated: “The creation and assignment of such labels separates students into those who are alienated from their identities and those alienated from education as useless, unproductive, or likely unsuccessful and they are further told similar messages of inadequacy and undesirability in media and society” (p. 18). This speaks to the harmful consequences of such labels for youth and their lives. Students may struggle in reading print, but it should not be the central ways in which they are defined.

Many times, youth may struggle with skills like decoding or reading fluency, but they can read social contexts and environments exceptionally well. They can read teachers’ moods and temperaments and if they feel the teachers like them or not. They become very skilled at reading people, expressions and dispositions. This type of reading shouldn’t go



unacknowledged, especially since this *sociocultural reading* of contexts and people have historically counted as reading among Black people. In truth, this contextual reading led many enslaved people to gaining freedoms.

The problems leading to the need for culturally relevant education have been inadequately addressed by many policies and initiatives in education. These become fresh coats of paint on structures that are debilitating.

While the look of these new approaches may seem different and innovative, they are not. They are just masking the same systemic ways of being and thinking about learning. These approaches continue to marginalize those who are already underserved in and out of schools. Examples of this “repainting,” to name a few, are evident in No Child Left Behind, Response to Intervention, and Race to the Top. More recently the College Board announced the “adversity score” for the SAT, which doesn’t get to the root of the problem with inequities and testing bias. These have been promoted under the guise of true equity, but they have instead either perpetuated harm on their own or, at best, failed to attack the root of the problem. Further, critical theorists of color are not largely the authors of these initiatives.



Culturally Relevant Education

Ladson-Billings made quite a mark on educational research and pedagogical practice because she began to put a name to the practices Black people have engaged in from the moments they were forcibly brought to the United States until contemporary times. Culturally relevant education (although not yet named) can be found in African philosophies of education, Black-centered schools in the United States, practices in Black literary societies, directions for education in Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and scholarship from authors such as Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, Carter G. Woodson, and W. E. B. Du Bois. This certainly is not an exhaustive list but begins to signify that Black people throughout history have laid the groundwork for education for all. I also found in a December 1, 1969 article in the *Black News* newspaper a list of 15 demands by Black high school students. These demands included:

1. No more automatic suspension of high school students
2. No more police or police aides inside NYC schools
3. Strict adherence to fire regulations—doors to schools must be left open
4. Open the schools daily to parent observation
5. Community rehabilitation centers must be allowed to set up programs to treat known drug addicts in the school buildings
6. Elimination of the General Course of Study
7. Elimination of all Regents Exams
8. Recognition in all NYC schools of two Black Holidays: May 19 (Malcolm X's birthday) and January 15 (Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday)
9. Immediate alternation of teacher population and examinations to supply Black educators proportionate to the student population
10. Complete examination of all books and educational supplies and materials used by the schools to their adequacy and relevancy

11. The creation of school clubs along ethnic lines with facilities and funds from the G.O.
12. Improved conditions for the students in the schools, such as music in the lunchrooms, more dances, improved athletic programs, and self-defense classes
13. Teachers with a background related to the course they are teaching
14. Creation of Student Faculty Council (equal representation), in each school which will make decisions on the following matters: curriculum, school staff, discipline, rules and regulations, etc.
15. The reorganization of the high schools along community lines so that Black students will not be forced to go to schools in hostile communities and seek an education

Threaded throughout these demands is the naming and demand for culturally relevant education spoken by youth. Using their minds and pens as a form of literary activism, they demand systems, structures, curriculum, and instruction that is connected to their lives and the sociopolitical nature of the community. Number 10 especially called for a review and examination of educational materials for the relevancy to the identities of students. This is yet another historically documented example of Black people calling for culturally relevant education. Other demands teach educators that if we just listen to the voices of youth, we will know exactly what to do in solving the problems in education. Their statements spoke to the need to have teaching, learning, and schooling be responsive to their histories, identities, literacies, and times in which they live.



*Using their minds
and pens as a form
of literary activism,
they demand systems,
structures, curriculum,
and instruction
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to their lives.*

Connecting Instruction to Students' Cultural Identities and Practices

Carrying the words of the youth and of Black history, Ladson-Billings' work informed educators of the importance of designing curriculum and instructional practices that authentically connect to students' cultural identities and cultural practices. Teachers were encouraged to incorporate students' cultures into their teaching as assets to classroom instruction rather than deficits to overcome (Paris, 2012). Culture is such a broad term, but has been defined as shared and common beliefs, models for living, and practices by a group of people. Cultural relevance is equity-centered and charges educators to engage in practices that push for social justice. Ladson-Billings (2014) concluded three major domains of the successful teachers' work:

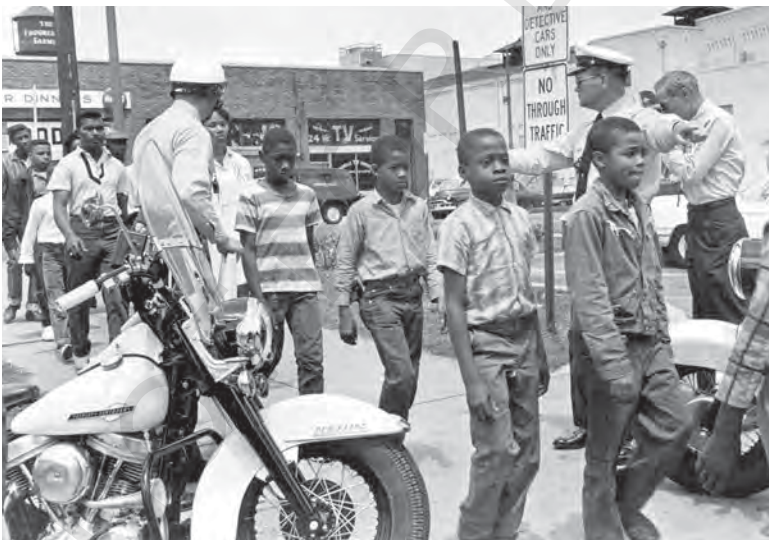
1. *Academic Success* or the intellect students gain as result of classroom instruction and learning
2. *Cultural Competence* or the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture
3. *Sociopolitical Consciousness* or the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems (p. 75)

Following this, in her 2000 text entitled *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Geneva Gay elaborates on the term "cultural responsiveness." She defines culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002). Her premise rests on the philosophy that teachers can't teach until they deeply know and understand cultural and ethnic ways of knowing and being, and this includes the tools, protocols, values, traditions, and ways of living of the students they teach. Gay (2010) suggests that students' interest and engagement in learning increase when educators use pedagogies connected to their experiences. Additionally, teachers using this approach see curriculum as a tool of power and a disruption of marginalization. In contrast, when students in classrooms do not receive such curriculum with elements of care, love, and respect at the center,

they tend to display resistance to the curriculum and instruction, as well as to teachers and to the school (Johnston, D'Andrea Montalbano & Kirkland, 2017). This resistance is usually called defiance and negative behavior in schools today. I want to remind readers of three moments in history when youth have resisted curriculum and instruction that lacked equity, access, and cultural relevance. They were consequently called defiant.



Picture #1—In the 1970s in South Africa, this photo displays Black children resisting Bantu education, which had substandard curriculum and resources in South Africa. They were also forced to learn in the Afrikaans language (which the youth called the oppressor's language), which was a language not spoken in the homes and communities of indigenous Africans.



Picture #2—In this photo, elementary-aged Black children are being taken to jail on May 4, 1963, after their arrest for protesting segregation in the United States.



Picture #3—In this photo from the 1960s, there is protest by young people resisting an education that didn't give them proper books and instruction.

What is common among all three historical photos is that when we look at them today, we speak of the students' bravery and courage to organize in ways to interrupt wrongdoing. Black students today don't receive that same commentary, yet they are in similar ways resisting curriculum and instruction that were not designed to advance their academic success or personal achievement.

Culture-Centered Theories and Models

In the midst of Ladson-Billings and Gay's work, other researchers have contributed to the educational community with other culture-centered theories and models. These include but are not limited to:

- **Funds of Knowledge** (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) Using students' reserves of knowledge constituted by events and activities of their households and communities to teach them
- **Cultural Modeling** (Lee, 1995) A framework for instruction that leverages everyday knowledge of youth

- **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies** (Paris, 2012) “Seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95)

Historically Responsive Literacy is when teaching, learning, and leadership beliefs and practices authentically respond to:

1. Students’ cultural (and other) identities
2. The cultural (and other) identities of others
3. The social times (historical and current)

Historically Responsive Literacy aligns with these models of “responsiveness” and “relevancy” as well as other cultural models in education, but is more pointedly centered on the literacy histories of Black people and a practical framework that teachers can use to guide and shape instruction. The emphasis on literacy and history is key because literacy is something that is practiced and developed across all educational learning and content areas. Thus, HRL becomes both a theory and a model that can be put into action in schools and classrooms. While a theory helps educators to explain or understand phenomena observed



in schools related to teaching and learning, a model serves as a metaphor to represent and explain a theory (Alvermann, Ruddell, & Unrau, 2013). A model represents a theory's variables and focuses more on the practicality of a theory. I frequently hear that teachers and school leaders understand culturally relevant/responsive education as a theory and understand its meaning. Yet, when it comes to putting this theory into accessible instructional and leadership actions, there is confusion about what to do exactly. I respond to this need to place theory into action and to pragmatize research through a four-layered pedagogical model.

Historically Responsive Literacy: Responding to the Histories, Identities, Literacies, and Language Practices of Students

Historically Responsive Literacy authentically draws upon and responds to the histories, identities, and literacy and language practices of students for teaching and learning:

- *Histories* include students' family, local, national, and global histories. Current instruction to culturally and linguistically diverse youth is often ahistorical and absent of the ways diverse groups have historically practiced and conceptualized literacy practices.
- *Identities* are multilayered and shaped by the social and cultural environment as well as by literacy practices (Gee, 2000). Examples of identities include racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, kinship, academic/intellectual, personal/individual, and community. Oftentimes, schools focus on students' perceived racial and gender identities and discount the other ways they self-identify. Students need opportunities in literacy pedagogy to explore multiple facets of self-identity and to learn about the identities (including cultural identities) of others who are different from them. Through the developmental years, young people are constantly understanding and (re)making a sense of positive selfhood. This is especially

important for culturally and linguistically diverse youth who have a history of being negatively represented and marginalized across large public platforms, including media and schools. To combat this, students need opportunities in class to make sense of their lives so that others cannot tell their stories.

- Finally, HRL takes a multiple *literacies* and *language* perspective and moves beyond the emphasis of defining literacy as solely reading, writing, and language skills. Instead, this approach takes a multiliteracies approach to underscore an understanding of literacies as being layered, nuanced, and complex. If literacy practices in classrooms are multiple and diverse, then students have a greater potential to achieve both personally and academically, especially within reading development (Moje, Luke, Davies & Street 2009). HRL responds to students' multiple literacy and languages practices. This includes the ways they read, write, speak, and know the world.

Historically Responsive Literacy builds upon the historical literacy practices of Black communities from the 19th century onward. Within an HRL approach, the ideologies, language used, instructional materials, and instructional practices honor and are authentically responsive to students' histories, identities, and literacies (which includes the ways



they use language). The social and political environment shapes students' histories, identities, and literacies and therefore they are always in flux and constantly changing. In this way, pedagogy must be viewed as both an art (imagination and creativity) and a science (theory, strategies, and methods of instruction). This approach calls for teachers to first unpack and make sense of their own histories and identities, which includes the ways they have used language and literacy

practices in their own lives. In doing so, they must also unpack their own biases, assumptions, racisms, and other oppressive thoughts they have come to believe about people of color or other people whom others have marginalized.

Approaches for Learning and Understanding the Histories, Identities, and Literacies of Students

Questions for Learning Students' Histories

- What are the histories of my students' schooling/school experiences?
- What are the histories of my students' families/cultures?
- What are the histories of our students' wider histories in their communities, in society, and in the world? Who are their people? How did they practice literacy and language historically?

Questions for Learning Students' Identities

- What are ways in which my students see and define their own lives?
- How are my students defined by others (both positive and negative representations)? If negative, how can we provide learning spaces to name, critique, and push back against such views? If positive, how can we provide learning spaces to help them trust and believe in the ways others see them?
- Whom do my students desire to be in their future? How do my students see their most desired future versions of themselves? How can my classroom instruction enable and cultivate these identities?

Questions for Learning Students' Literacy and Language Practices

- How do my students practice literacies at home and in their communities? What language(s) do they speak?
- What is the purpose of literacy and language in their lives?
- How were literacy and language cultivated historically with their families and ancestors?

In general, I suggest that educators to do the following:

- **Listen to and trust the child.** This seems like such a simple approach, but it is surprising how many people dismiss the ideas, perspectives, and opinions of people of color and of children—as if they are not being fully transparent about their experiences.
- **Engage in teacher action research.** Teachers engage in inquiry-based learning and assessments of their own practices. Ethically, they seek knowledge about their students and about their pedagogy.
- **Ask students to write their autobiographies and personal narratives.** Students can start with their earliest memories of traditions, education, religion, triumphs, defeats, and so on. Teachers must have permission to read such personal accounts. Teachers may also engage students in digital storytelling to depict their own lives and create a multimodal presentation.
- **Interview parents or family members of students who are culturally different from them.** Invite family and community members to the school to hear and learn for them.
- **Study the curriculum and explore ways to make studies meaningful to students and their families and communities.** Too often educators passively follow curriculum and standards that were not designed with their students in mind. Rather, we need to analyze and criticize what we are told to teach and what we are told to teach with. Then, educators should add to the existing curriculum to authentically teach in HRL ways.

Historically Responsive Literacy: Responding to the Social Times (Historically and Currently)

Historically Responsive Literacy also calls for educators to be responsive to the social and political times we have historically lived in and currently live within. When working directly with teachers, I often ask, *How would you describe our social times (historical or current)?* Regularly, I hear responses like, “dismal, hopeless, tragic, racist, sexist, and lacking compassion for people who are oppressed like Black folks, immigrants,

and Muslims”; other descriptions might include “technological, forward thinking, and more access to information.” HRL practices are responsive to all of the above and additionally include engaging in literacy practices that are multimodal and digital while also teaching and learning how to respond to racism, religious discrimination, homophobia, sexism, ableism, classism, and other oppressions.

The critical need for a culturally responsive pedagogy is best exemplified when we connect the past to the present and witness the lack of progress we have made as a country. For example, in my historical work, I found an excerpt from an 1896 Black newspaper, which describes police brutality when a sheriff fired shots into a crowd of Black boys, killing one and wounding others. The sheriff claimed the order came in to shoot over their heads to frighten them.

One Black commentator added: *Will the day ever come when white men in the South will cease their inhumanity to Negroes?* Fast-forward 116 years later when we witnessed the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. We are still asking the same questions about the senseless killing of our children. We are still hearing poor and unjust excuses for killing (physically and spiritually) Black children. This is just one example of the oppression, and we know that films and TV shows, commercial ads, literature, and other media have conditioned us to accept these.

I am also reminded of countless racist and sexist advertisements historically (and presently) that have represented Black and Brown people as unintelligent, unattractive, and uncouth, while women were depicted as subservient and unable to work. And because we know that schools reflect society, we have police roaming school hallways and policing classrooms, Black teens arrested for infractions that White students escape with only a slap on the wrist, and Black teens being tried

Negro Boys Shot In Florida

PENSACOLA, Fla., Apr. 25, 1896—A sheriff's posse brutally fired into a crowd of colored boys, killing one and wounding several others. The boys were practicing military movements.

The sheriff is said to have ordered the posse to frighten the boys by shooting over their heads. But in the gunfire, one boy was killed and several wounded. Commenting on the incident, the black editor of the *Richmond Planet* asked: “Will the day ever come when white men in the South will cease their inhumanity to Negroes?”

as adults. Whiteness pervades nearly everything from nursery rhymes, cartoons, children's literature in the Common Core State Standards, and the ways in which we interact with and teach our students.

The news brings reports of children of color facing mental and physical abuse in schools or encountering educators who devalue their worth and potential. And the texts teachers are given also undermine the heritage and cultural identities of children of color. Textbooks are still not written to give a complete account of Black lives or the history of enslavement. Less than 25 percent of children's books in the past 18 years contain multicultural content—the majority not created by authors of color. Most schools desire culturally responsive practices without deep conversations about the root cause of this theory and model. The need for Culturally Relevant Education (CRE) and Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) is clear—racism and the dehumanizing of Black people in and outside of schools. This is why HRL specifically calls for urgent pedagogies that are not just responsive to the social times but pedagogies that are anti-racist and overall, anti-oppressive.

Historically Responsive Literacies Call for “Urgent Pedagogies”

I argue that what is (still) needed is a shift. A shift in thinking and the types of instructional practices in which we engage our young people, a shift in the policies that govern the schools, a shift in the curriculum that teachers are told to teach, and a shift in the ways we support and prepare teachers for the field. We live in a period where there's no time for “urgent-free pedagogy.” Our instructional pursuits must be honest, bold, raw, unapologetic, and responsive to the social times. This message is embodied in a 1967 interview with Gwendolyn Brooks (Gayles, 2003). At one point in time, Brooks was known for writing sonnets and “lighter” poems about love.

Brooks' love poetry embodied the essence and purity of love, but in the late 1960s she was asked about the shift in her writings when she moved to write more about Black ideology and expression. She was asked if she was still writing sonnets. She responded:

No, I'm not writing sonnets, and I probably won't be, because, as I've said many times, this does not seem to me to be a sonnet time. It seems to be a free verse time, because this is a raw, ragged, uneven time—with rhymes, if there are rhymes, incidental and random. I am in transition (Gayles, 2003, p. 68).

From the times that Black people were stolen away into slavery until today, we have been in transition. Transition typically signifies change, development, and transformation. Transitions are challenging, and diverse people have always lived in a transitional state due to the social environment and the times that have not always been kind and fair. We have had to resist and live in a constant state of resistance or transition. We are still living in uneven times; traditional forms of pedagogy and research are not warranted. We need raw and historic pedagogies—and responsiveness. We need excellence in schools that helps to advance marginalized communities so that young people can rise up and experience joy and love and the rich learning they deserve. How do we engage youth in schools? How do we engage them in reading, writing, speaking, and thinking practices in pedagogies that are responsive to the social times and responsive to the social, cultural, ethnic, and gendered identities of our youth? How do teachers, the curriculum and instruction, and school leadership serve to disrupt racism, sexism, and other oppressions? What critical issues warrant the urgency of students' pens, learning, and thinking? The Historical Responsive Literacy model begins to answer these questions.



Examples of Urgent Pedagogies

- Using diverse forms of text by diverse authors
- Harnessing positive energy to push through weariness
- Building collaborative curriculum with youth
- Teaching in ways that move beyond sanctioned norms and processes
- Listening to students of color even when you don't agree or understand
- Making it impossible for students to fail
- Writing and reflecting on teaching practices
- Teaching in unapologetic ways
- Decentering self as the teacher
- Becoming a scholar of the discipline you teach and knowing the meaning and histories of your content areas

Historically Responsive Literacy Calls for Knowledge of:

- Self and our own ideologies
- Culture and identity
- Our students' lives
- Our historical and current social times
- History and the authentic histories of our content areas
- Instructional methods of responsive pedagogy
- A natural sense of imagination, innovation and artistic sensibilities of teaching

Students carry rich experiences and ways of knowing, speaking to, and being in the world. In order to teach in HRL ways, teachers must spend time cultivating the mind (their intellect), the heart (how they feel about youth), and the hands (strategies and methods craft of teaching). When teachers ask immediately for the strategies, I know they haven't first cultivated their thinking and love for this work and the students they teach.

The Historically Responsive Literacy Model: Identity, Skills, Intellect, and Criticality

As I investigated historical records, literacy and responsive education across Black literary communities were largely conceptualized in four ways—as identity development, skills development, intellect, and criticality. These four goals or pursuits connected to the body of literacy research on cognitive and sociocultural perspectives of literacy development and what youth need to attain personal and academic success. It’s key to remember that literacy was synonymous with education, so although I name “literacy,” these four pursuits can be used and layered with math, science, ELA, social studies, or physical education/health.

1. Literacy as Identity Meaning-Making

While historic Black communities in literary societies read and wrote texts, they also defined literacy as the ability to read and write their lives (Freire & Macedo, 1987). The ability to read one’s world meant understanding the self within local and broader contexts and reading the signs of the time to inform their actions and behaviors. They were able to make meaning of their many and complex identities including their collective Black identity in America to their larger global identities and positions in the world. The topics and texts selected for study held themes that supported defining their lives and helped them to gain confidence in knowing who they are.

2. Literacy as Skills

Aligned with traditional definitions, literacy was identified as cognitive acts of reading, writing, and speaking skills—as being able to read and write print independently. Finding meaning in language and the construction of meaning was the central goal for their literacy development. Learning and practicing acts of reading, writing, and speaking would lead members to experience joy in literature and give them a platform to project their voices to public audiences. They also learned skills necessary across other content areas.

3. Literacy as Intellect

Literacy was viewed as an intellectual endeavor. As they were reading, writing, and speaking, they were doing so to gain new academic knowledge. Acts of literacy were tied to the historical tradition of scholasticism during this time (Kallus & Ratliff, 2011) and they were gaining knowledge across disciplinary areas. Literacy development was the root of all other learning in the disciplines including literature, language, science, history, and mathematics.

4. Literacy as Criticality

An end goal of literacy entailed a transformative purpose for change and liberation. In this way, literacy was also a step toward social change and linked to the ideals of liberation, security, and protection. Acts of reading, writing, and speaking served both oppressive and emancipatory functions in the 19th century (Harris, 1992). Because rights were denied and the ideologies of those in legislative power neglected to fully represent the rights and presence of Black people, they began to use literacy as the means to counter injustice and misrepresentations. Gaining authority over print meant that they did not wait or seek permission from others to use language in ways to infuse their own voices, ideals, and stances.


As teachers think of these four pursuits in their HRL instruction, they should ask themselves:

- **Identity:** How will my instruction help students to learn something about themselves and/or about others?
- **Skills:** How will my instruction build students' skills for the content area?
- **Intellect:** How will my instruction build students' knowledge and mental powers?
- **Criticality:** How will my instruction engage students' thinking about power and equity and the disruption of oppression?

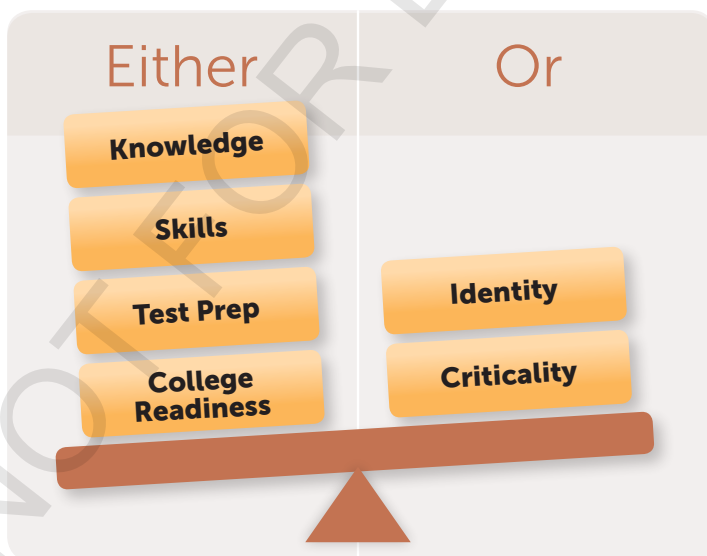
I argue that young people in classrooms today need teaching and learning opportunities to cultivate these four pursuits and learning goals. These four ways of conceptualizing literacy become the four-layered equity framework and begin to take culturally responsive theory and put it

into a practical model that teachers can take up in classrooms across content areas. The Historically Responsive Literacy Framework is a set of interdisciplinary learning goals for rethinking and redesigning curriculum and pedagogy. The identity and criticality elements of the HRL Framework also help to differentiate between good teaching and responsive teaching. In other words, good teaching may just be the teaching of skills and intellect, but historically responsive literacy teaching is the teaching of all four.

Still, we have to ask what happens when we just teach one or two of the four goals. When studying several states' learning goals, I find they are either focused solely on skills or on skills and knowledge development. But historically, people of color, living in conditions of turmoil, still held much stronger and more intellectually invigorating learning goals for their educational achievement. Given the richness in technology and resources that we have now, why can't we align to these same goals today? This shouldn't be an either/or challenge (Tatum, 2006), suggesting that we either have to advance students' identity and criticality or their content skills, knowledge, test preparation, and college readiness (see Figure below). Historically, our ancestors of color didn't make this distinction, so why do we have to choose one or the other now?



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For this reason, over the past few years, I have been rewriting the Common Core State Standards and other state learning goals to infuse them with the Historically Responsive Literacy learning standards. The HRL Framework encourages educators to go beyond skills and knowledge in their lesson planning and practice. These goals build upon one another. If students know themselves, they are engaged with the confidence to learn the skills. If they have the skills, they can learn new knowledge and critique that knowledge. HRL as a theory teaches the whole child and is a framework for scaffolding learning that was designed for people of color and all underserved students. We must stop implementing curriculum and literacy models that were not designed for or by people of color, expecting that these models will advance the educational achievement of children of color. This is the same as designing a size 2 ball gown for a size 10 model. We expect youth to work inside frameworks that were not designed for them.



When we further consider these four pursuits (each discussed in upcoming chapters), we know that we are cultivating children's quality of life in their post K–12 experiences. When I think of the greatest leaders of our time, they hold identity (or a strong sense of self and others), plus skills, intellect, and criticality. On the other hand, the greatest oppressors of the world lack criticality and knowledge of self and of others. The next chapters will explicitly discuss each of the four pursuits of the HRL Framework.

Questions for Further Consideration: Teachers and Preservice Teachers

1. What are the histories of the students in your class? Think about their histories in the school, community, home, and wider society.
2. How do the students' histories connect to your content areas? How have their people historically contributed to the development of mathematics, science, social studies, literature, and language?
3. Who are your students? Whom do they say they are? Who do others say they are (think also how they are portrayed in the media)? Whom do they desire to be?
4. What are your students' literacy practices outside of the classroom? What do they read and write? How do they speak? What are the ways in which they know about the world around them?
5. How do the students' histories, identities, and literacies compare to your own?

Questions for Further Consideration: Principals and School Leaders

1. How do your interview questions screen potential teachers for culturally and historically responsive education? You may need to rewrite or revise interview questions to screen for teachers who are prepared to teach to respond to the students' identities and sociopolitical consciousness.
2. How does the diversity of teachers align with diversity of students and of the community?
3. Do students have teachers who look like them and share cultural identities? What are some ways you recruit teachers of color?
4. Are teachers prepared to teach in response to students' histories, identities, literacies, and language? How do you know?
5. Are you asking teachers to teach in culturally and historically responsive ways but implicitly pushing the teaching of skills or test preparation only? How do your observational and evaluation tools support the teaching of culturally and historically responsiveness?