WHAT ARE LEADERS OF TECH PROGRAMS FOR BLACK STUDENTS WILLING TO SACRIFICE FOR MONEY?

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Abstract:
A lead instructional coach at a social justice-oriented summer tech program for students of color reflects on feedback she received from other members of the organization's leadership. Students were admonished for using phones, wearing headphones, taking breaks, and choosing when to participate in activities. Leaders of the organization wanted to inhibit students from engaging in behaviors that might prevent donors from continuing to support the program. The author offers reflections on the experience and believes that preparing students for tech fields involves promoting autonomy and self-management. She also believes that donors should be better prepared to enter tech classes.

Key words: technology education, summer programs, project-based learning, donors

This summer, I worked for a social justice organization with a twofold mission. First, the organization intends to increase pathways for students of color who plan to enter careers in technology and entrepreneurship. Second, the organization plans to facilitate identity and leadership development necessary for students to graduate from college and successfully enter the tech job market. To complete the program, students return to campus for three consecutive summers and progress through rigorous classes. As the lead instructional coach, I hired a team of computer science teachers, college navigation coaches, macro- and microeconomics professionals, and app-builders. Together, we delivered project-based learning workshops to mostly Black students from three Northeastern states.

As a teacher-turned-doctoral-student, I crave interactions with young people and was excited about what I could bring to the organization. My past teaching experiences occurred in traditional spaces, so the prospect of authentic student empowerment exhilarated me. I envisioned classrooms where I could talk openly about oppressive systems while students sat in circles or on the floor. I combed my personal and professional networks because I was excited about the opportunity to expose students to Black tech professionals and other tech professionals of color. I imagined workspaces like Facebook or Google—spaces that offer students the freedom and flexibility to learn and produce in authentic and creative ways. Because of this, students in my classrooms were allowed to wear headphones; take frequent, unmonitored breaks; and intermittently play games on their computers and phones. When asked, students expressed excitement about the curriculum and admitted that they felt powerful and agentic in classrooms.

After a few weeks of program operations, I noticed that there were clear areas of growth, both for members of my teaching staff and for me as an instructional leader. Two of my teachers struggled to build rapport with students, and we began to notice holes in the curriculum we were provided. I also found it difficult to support teachers through a five-week program. Most teachers only taught for three hours a day, two or three times a week. Traditional coaching cycles (where a leader observes, reflects on that observation, and then gives a teacher feedback to implement) took entirely too long. However, I was not trained to give in-the-moment feedback and teachers were not trained to immediately implement changes. Because of this, I was naturally anxious about two upcoming visits. First, leaders in the organization were coming to our site to assess how I was doing and give feedback. Second, the organization's founder and largest donor was visiting our site (along with other potential donors) to observe classes. The second visit was the most important because it could directly lead to the funding necessary for the program's continuation and expansion.

During the first visit, I craved feedback about instructional decisions and the execution of the curriculum. The feedback I received, however, was not about instructional materials or our implementation of them. Instead, we heard: *Your students are on their phones, and this is unacceptable. They are not being prepared for the workforce. Some students are playing games on their computers or wearing headphones while they work, and this shows that they are not engaged. Some students did not participate in mini-activities, and you need to demand participation from 100% of students. If donors came into these classrooms and saw these behaviors, they would certainly disapprove.* I was disheartened. This was a program marketed to students and their

families as “transformative” and “liberatory.” However, leaders’ traditional views of what “engagement” should look like were no different than those held by leaders in “no-nonsense” models of schooling.

The situation became even more complicated after considering the demographics of both the students served and the (mostly white) funders. Aghasaleh (2018) warns us about judgments we make that imply that some bodies require more discipline than others. The feedback I received was riddled with judgments about Black students and what bodily movements are considered acceptable for them. Students were commissioned to build an app over several weeks and given semi-structured work time to accomplish the task; naturally, they wore headphones, occasionally answered texts from relatives or friends, and took breaks as needed. During training, I even instructed teachers to let students opt out of low-stakes activities, affectionately referring to this as “a student’s right to pass.” The justification was simple: I did not feel comfortable *making* students do anything with their bodies that they did not want to do. During each nonessential activity over the summer, three or four students respectfully “passed” and chose to meditate, rest, or observe without participating. And, in this process, I noticed that actions that might look like a lack of engagement to classroom visitors were simply actions that our students took to take care of themselves. Unfortunately, instead of preparing potential funders for what they could expect to see in our classrooms—instead of preparing them for freedom and mindfulness and humanity enacted—I was told to prepare students to meet the expectations of funders. These expectations were rooted in racism and grounded in assumptions about how polite Black children should behave. After the first visit, students returned their phones to their backpacks, removed their headphones, and sat untalking and upright in their seats. Because of this, our second visit went well.

In a social justice organization that aims to equip students for the best positions in tech the main priority should be to authentically prepare students for what they will experience in the workplace. When students secure tech jobs, they will have autonomy over their bodies. They will need to balance texting occasionally, taking short breaks to unplug, or listening to music while they work with meeting deadlines on projects that are often weeks away. Few bosses will demand that tech employees put away their phones. Even fewer will discipline employees for taking quick breaks or playing games on their computers to reset. In fact, the most progressive tech offices have started *providing the games* as they know that tech-related leisure in the workplace can boost employee job satisfaction and productivity (Mohammad et al., 2019). Simply put, demanding that students in tech classes be 100 percent engaged 100 percent of the time is both unrealistic and counterproductive. And when we demand that Black children are 100 percent engaged 100 percent of the time (not only in a voluntary, social-justice-oriented summer program, but in any educative space), we may gain donors, but at what cost?

It is important for students to be allowed to develop self-management techniques. Will students ever learn autonomy if we demand that their phones are away and they do not actively make choices about appropriate phone usage? If we continue removing distractions from students instead of guiding them to properly manage them, for what are we preparing our students? I am aware that this program, and others like it, depend on donors who need to feel their money is being well spent. But perhaps donors need to re-evaluate what success and productivity look like in transformative workspaces. Or, perhaps, we need different donors.

While I may not have all the answers for keeping donors interested, a careful critique of what organizations are willing to sacrifice for donor dollars is essential. So, to return to my original question: What are leaders of tech programs for Black students willing to sacrifice for money?

Absolutely too much.

Sia Elle Brown is simultaneously a doctoral student in Educational Leadership and a student in the School Leadership Program at the University of Pennsylvania.

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