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Putting on Our Pedagogical Love Vests to Affirm the Poetic Literacies & Lives of Black High School Students

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Abstract: Through this research, I illuminate the power in creating curricula that honor Black poetic excellence as a means to support and affirm Black high school students. To do so, I explore the poetry writing of two Black ninth grade students, Brandon and Nyla, and the importance of their participation in the Scholar Collaborative, a school-based, pre-college course that highlighted Black poets. Data sources include Brandon and Nyla's written poems, interviews, and observations of Scholar Collaborative sessions. Third Space theory provides a framework for understanding how the Scholar Collaborative operated as a space rooted in pedagogical love for Black students, their lives, and their poetry. Additionally, the findings highlight how Brandon and Nyla used poetry-writing to detail experiences that both challenged their identities and strengthened their self-acceptance and self-love. Study data support the implementation of curricula that draw on Black poetic excellence to affirm Black students through supporting their literacies and lives.

Keywords: Black youth literacies; Black youth poetry; secondary literacy classrooms



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The great writer Zora Neale Hurston said,
Fear was the greatest emotion on the planet Earth
and I said,
No my dear sista,
Fear will make us move to save our lives,
To save our own skins,
But love will make us save other people's skins and
lives,
So love is primary at this particular point in time.
Put on, what I like to call:
The sleeves of love
Put on the legs of love
Put on the feet of love
Put on the head of love
Put on the mouth of love
Put on the hands of love...

-Sonia Sanchez (2009)

Introduction¹

In the above excerpt from her poem “Put on the Sleeves of Love,” Sonia Sanchez (2009), Black woman poet and activist, brilliantly speaks about the power of love versus fear in a fictional dialogue with her Sista’ writer, folklorist, and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston. Through this poetic narrative, Sanchez centers a message focused on the power of embodying love not only for personal protection, but for the greater good of communities. In her poem, she intentionally chooses to engage in this fictional conversation with Zora Neale Hurston. This choice is significant given that Hurston and her literary body of work served as major catalysts for Sanchez’s pursuit of writing. Sanchez’s introduction at 19 years old to Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in addition to other Black authors, sparked her literary career and commitment to illuminating the Black experience and Black humanity through her

work (Sanchez, 2007). Sanchez’s poem holds significance in the context of this research since it served as a mentor text within the focal program, the Scholar Collaborative, a school-university partnership where educators connected Black ninth-grade students to Black poets. The Scholar Collaborative served as one of multiple programs within one midwestern university’s GEAR-UP program. GEAR-UP is a national program focused on increasing the number of underrepresented students who matriculate in and through post-secondary education institutions.

In the context of this research, which focuses on supporting Black students’ writing, her poem serves as a “call to action” to embody love when teaching and caring for Black students. Sanchez’s exploration and advocacy for the kind of love that protects, serves, and heals communities continuing to experience educational marginalization informs this research. We need only look at the news stories permeating the media and listen to the young ones in our families and classrooms to understand how the lives of Black girls and boys continue to be taken, threatened, and undervalued. Protecting, serving, and supporting Black students requires that, as educators, we see our well-being attached to their well-being, a necessary component of pedagogical love. Lyiscott (2019) offers a poignant conceptualization of embracing *pedagogical love* within educational spaces for Youth of Color. According to Lyiscott,

To love in the context of this work is to remember. To remember—that is, to acknowledge the myriad historical violences that continue to shape the realities of urban schools—and to re-member—that is to affirm, humanize, and sustain the power that already

¹ I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article I use

pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

exists within Black and Brown communities as central to their transformation (p. 4).

By embracing pedagogical love, she reminds us that through curricula and forms of engagement with students, we must account for their individual and collective histories in ways that affirm their existence. Within this study, I focus on the pedagogical intentionality in creating an educational space dedicated to Black students, their experiences, writing, and the writing of Black poets. I particularly delve into the Scholar Collaborative, as a Third Space (Gutiérrez, 2008), one that relied on historical texts authored by Black poets as a means to affirm the multiple literacies that Black youth employ when given the space to do so (Butler, 2017). More specifically, I highlight the poetic narratives of two Black ninth-grade students, Brandon and Nyla, who were inspired by featured Black poets. Their poetry reflects school and life experiences that challenged parts of their identities, and illuminates growing confidence and self-love. In an effort to demonstrate the significance of the Scholar Collaborative and Brandon and Nyla's poetry, I explored the following research questions:

In what ways does centering Black poets and their poetry serve as pedagogical catalysts for students' and poetry writing?

What do we learn about the identity challenges that Black youth experience through their poetry writing?

In the three sections that follow within the literature review, I foreground research that focuses on equity-based pedagogical practices and research that contextualize the significance of honoring Black

authors in school-based curricula. I also highlight scholars whose research sits at the intersections of this study as a means to support the literacy and identity development of Black students and Students of Color. I organize the manuscript by first reviewing three areas of research that speak to the importance of equity-based pedagogies and practices that center Black literary and poetic excellence as a means to affirm Black students' literacies, followed by a theoretical grounding of Third Space theory. Within the Findings and Discussion sections I then speak to the importance of pedagogies rooted in honoring Black authors and poets as a means to affirm Black high school students' voices, literacies, and lives.

Literature Review

“The integration of texts is not a comprehensive solution to affirming the literacies and lives of Black students, yet it serves as a powerful and necessary practice.”

To frame my study, I review work in three related areas: the pedagogies of inclusion of diverse authors, the significance of Black poets and poetry, and the importance of centering Black authors in educational spaces.

Pedagogies of Inclusion of Diverse Authors

Central to this research is a focus on honoring students' cultures, experiences, and writing. These principles sit at the core of longstanding and emerging equity-based pedagogies and are integral to supporting the academic, social, and cultural well-being of students who have been marginalized in educational spaces (Au, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Philosophies that honor students' cultures should appear more than occasionally in the curriculum. They more significantly are meant to serve as pedagogical roots. Educators can draw on multiple methods to engage in pedagogical practices that center and affirm students' cultures, and

critically implementing texts by authors of color represents one method of doing so. To be clear, the integration of texts is not a comprehensive solution to affirming the literacies and lives of Black students. Yet it serves as a powerful and necessary practice.

Critically centering the voices and lives of Black authors and Black people within school curricula represents one of several methods of creating literacy spaces that counter the silencing of Black voices (Johnson, 2018). According to Bishop (1990), “through the mirror of literature we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, of reaffirming our place in the world and our society” (p. 3). Bishop discusses how diverse texts can provide cultural mirrors, reflecting students’ own experiences, and can also provide windows into other peoples’ lives. Engaging in school spaces that allow such opportunities can support Black students’ positive identity development, particularly during the middle grades and high school. This time represents a pivotal developmental stage where they are continuing to forge their identities and understand who they are, while navigating messages from family, peers, school, and the media about their own identities.

In many K-12 school spaces, an absence of centering the contributions of authors of color and Black authors within text selections exists (McNair, 2016). The omission of critical writing by diverse authors including Black authors is not simply a form of benign neglect as if it bears no weight on Black students’ academic and identity development.

According to Johnson et al. (2017), “when we reject the multiple identities our Black students bring to the classroom, silence their voices by centering the lived experiences and stories of Europeans, and disrespect them by lowering our expectations and over-surveilling their bodies, bullets are shot at them” (p. 61). When an inequity exists in whose stories or whose excellence is represented in texts our students read, this imbalance sends damaging messages that Black authors are not valuable enough to include in curriculum, and that Black literary excellence does not exist. Yet the contrary is true: Black literary excellence exists historically and contemporarily.

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Supporting the literacy development and affirming the lives of Black students requires an understanding that these actions are inextricably linked to the history of literacy in the Black community. It is particularly important to acknowledge this history as it has implications for how we understand and construct educational spaces to support Black students’ academic success and their literacies. As Coles (2019) notes, “in the examination of Black literacies in

an anti-Black nation, it must be understood that literacy has always been thought of as a humanizing tool” (p. 7). Black people were legally denied the right to literacy and risked their lives to become literate (Anderson, 1988; Perry et al., 2003). This not-so-distant history must not be forgotten. Possessing a contextual and historical understanding of literacy in the Black community allows educators to understand the residual manifestations of such actions in school-based curricula. It also provides context for Black peoples’ insistence at becoming literate as a tool for freedom, community advancement, and the assertion of their humanity (Hilliard, 1995). Literacy inside the

Black community continues to serve these purposes as schools and societies struggle with fully honoring Black literacies (Baker-Bell, 2020). This struggle is visible in many aspects of society, including educators' longstanding battles with textbook writers who omit, represent selectively, or contort Black history and Black lives. It is also visible within uneven representation in the publishing world, lack of mainstream access to Black authors (Harris, 1991), and lack of authentic and consistent representation in K-12 literacy-focused curricula (Boyd et al., 2015). Acknowledging this rich, complicated history provides a tool for then creating educational spaces where Black literacies are honored and allowed to grow.

Significance of Black Poets & Poetry

In an effort to create school spaces that honor Black students, educators must acknowledge how Black excellence in writing has vast and powerful historical roots that continue to thrive. Black poets have forged powerful legacies that explore not only what it means to be Black, but also what it means to be human (Dungy, 2009; Rambsy, 2013). Black poets during the Harlem Renaissance, Black Power Movement, Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter Movement, and all spaces before, after, and in between, have been poetic innovators, contributors, and sages. Margaret Walker, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Georgia Douglass Walker wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, claiming the existence and power in Black literary excellence. Their poems were multifaceted, illuminating the Black experience, forging artistic pathways for art as a humanizing tool, for relief from oppression, and for resistance against inequity.

Black protest poets—including Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, and Audre Lorde— used their poetry to forge solidarity and assert Black people's humanity in a time and space where Black people continued to demand their basic human rights in all realms of society. Contemporary Black poets including Jessica Care Moore, Saul Williams, Aja Monet, Yrsa Daley-Ward, Gloria House, and the Black Bottom Collective continue to do so, employing poetry as a means to push back against social injustices. Whether they write about love, loss, being human, or being Black in the U.S., Black poets view their work as connected to the uplifting of their communities and the recasting of their lives as meaningful in society.

Centering Black Authors in Educational Spaces

Intentionally centering authors of color and Black authors has been embedded in the philosophies of critical scholars committed to remembering, honoring, and sustaining Black authors' literacy contributions. Through their scholarship they have either created, participated in, or researched counterspaces

(Carter, 2007) that reject the notion that Black students' lives are unworthy of regular spotlights inside school and beyond school curriculum. This work is premised on a belief that connecting Youth of Color to the range of literary excellence among diverse authors is tantamount to affirming their lives and contributions as writers. Scholars such as Jocoson (2006) have committed to centering the poetic excellence of Black poets such as June Jordan as a means to support the identity development of Youth of Color. Tatum (2009), through his scholarship on supporting the literacies of young Black men, asserts that connecting Black males to the richness of

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literature authored by Black males serves to build their literary lineages.

Strengthening literary lineages is necessary for Black males as well as for Black girls and other students whose stories are not often present in dominant curricula. In building the literary lineages of Black youth and Youth of Color, these spaces support their identity development and honor the significance of their voice via writing in multiple ways. Fisher (2007), in her ethnographic work that explores the power of poetry among Youth of Color, asserts that such spaces serve to “build literate identities” (p. 92). As she demonstrates, poetry can serve as a tool to support Black students’ ability to understand themselves as writers who possess valuable stories that deserve to be written, read, and remembered.

In addition to serving as a means for self-exploration and validation of their voices, poetry can serve as a platform allowing youth to critique injustices they experience, witness, and are generally aware of in larger society (Blackburn, 2002; Kim, 2013; Manning, 2016). Scholars have reminded us that writing can allow students who have been marginalized to draw on their literacies to enact school, community, and societal change (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2000). Camangian (2008) and Kinloch (2005) capture how poetry opens avenues for Black youth to engage in poetry as a form of democratic and civic engagement. This commitment importantly includes out-of-school spaces that center Black women authors as a means to then foreground the lives and writing of Black middle school and high school girls (McArthur & Muhammad, 2020; Winn, 2019; Wissman, 2009). Through this body of scholarship, scholars continue to detail the ways in which Black girls specifically use multiple forms of writing, including poetry and playwriting, to push back against racism, sexism, and classism.

Embedded in the aforementioned studies and the educational spaces that Black youth and Youth of Color have occupied, lies a belief that their voices are valuable and matter. This validation reminds students engaging in these spaces of the historical and contemporary literary excellence that resides within communities of Color. I explore how this belief in Black literary excellence was embodied through the Scholar Collaborative, a space designed to support the academic success of Black high school students.

Theoretical Framework: Third Space

In order to make sense of the pedagogical structure of the Scholar Collaborative as well as students’ writing, I relied on the concept of *Third Space*, which enabled an analysis of space and the intertwining of personal, social, and historical elements. More contemporarily, scholars have conceptualized spaces that sit outside traditional framings of primary and secondary spaces of school and home as Third Spaces (Bhabha, 1994; Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Soja, 1996). At the core of Third Space theory is an examination of the intersection of factors including those that are personal, cultural, historical, social, and political.

While each theorist adds dimensions to Third Space theory, in the context of this study I focus primarily on Gutiérrez’s (2008) conceptualization, which highlights the significance of transforming school spaces to embrace youth who are marginalized by school and society. Through Gutiérrez’s conceptualization of Third Space, she calls for “a paradigm shift for what counts as schooling for youth in the United States” (p. 148). This paradigm shift is one in which students’ experiences and the multiple components of their identities are seen as valid and necessary within schooling and school curricula. This shift is “primary at this particular point in time” (Sanchez, 2009) given the mechanisms by which traditional or dominant schooling has underserved

students, particularly Students of Color and students who have been marginalized.

According to Gutiérrez (2008), Third Spaces are composed of “teacher and student scripts—the formal and informal, the official and unofficial spaces of the learning environment—intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge” (p. 152). These spaces counter deficit conceptions of who Youth of Color are, what they deserve and their capabilities. Gutiérrez acknowledges mediating variables that influence how Third Spaces come to be or how they exist, including sociocritical literacy, which operates to counter school practices that embrace ahistorical learning and literacy practices. Using Third Space advances an understanding of characteristics of hybrid educational spaces such as the Scholar Collaborative that focus on embracing and supporting the academic success of Black youth. Through this article, I provide an analysis of the activities and interactions that occurred within the Scholar Collaborative, and an analysis of the writing that Nyla and Brandon created within this particular space through a Third Space lens.

Methods

In an effort to study The Scholar Collaborative within GEAR-UP as well as the writing that occurred, I implemented a case study. As Yin (2017) notes, one of the major components of case study design includes engaging in descriptive discussion of the units of analysis and connecting data collection methods to develop a story relative to the units of analysis. The units of analysis include the pedagogical practices employed within the Scholar Collaborative, students’ experiences within the Scholar Collaborative, and their poetry writing. I constructed data collection methods that allowed for in-depth exploration of these units as is required in case study research.

These data collection strategies included collecting course curricula and conducting course observations as a means to explore the first research question, which focuses on better understanding the pedagogical practices instituted within the Scholar Collaborative. Collecting students’ poetry writing and experiences inside the Scholar Collaborative served as a means to explore the second research question, which focuses on the type of writing they created and the content. I offer more specific details about each form of data collection in the data collection section.

Researcher’s Positionality

In order to provide context for my role as both a researcher and participant in the study, I detail my connection to Jordan University’s GEAR-UP program and the Scholar Collaborative. For several years prior to the Scholar Collaborative, I served as a GEAR-UP program coordinator, developing literacy-focused curricula. I am also a Black woman educator and researcher, committed to supporting and honoring Black students’ literacies. I conceptualized the Scholar Collaborative in partnership with GEAR-UP staff in response to many of our GEAR-UP students articulating their desire to more intensely study the work of Black authors. I served as a participant observer (Glesne, 2011), which supported my ability to focus on capturing students’ experiences inside the Scholar Collaborative, and to provide curricular support. This role provided an opportunity for meaningful participation. However, I also ensured that I accounted for how my closeness to the program and students influenced my subjectivity. Thus, where possible I member-checked my interpretations of data, particularly surrounding Brandon and Nyla’s writing.

GEAR-UP & Scholar Collaborative Context

In an effort to ensure anonymity for study participants, I assigned pseudonyms to school and

city names, names of programs, and participants. The study took place at Oakbridge High School, located in Oakbridge, a small Mid-western urban city. Oakbridge City is predominantly Black, representative of the high school student population. Oakbridge High School and GEAR-UP became partners through the GEAR-UP pre-college program grant. GEAR-UP is a federally-funded pre-college program designed to increase the number of underrepresented students in post-secondary education on a national level. Jordan University's GEAR-UP program hosted programs on campus, in community centers near Oakbridge, and at Oakbridge High School.

At the time of the implementation of the Scholar Collaborative and study, Oakbridge city schools were facing tremendous change, leading Oakbridge school leadership to seek to strengthen community partnerships that could positively impact students at the high school. The Scholar Collaborative was created by myself; the GEAR-UP director, Dr. Malcolm; an Americore Vista worker with a background in social work, Sanaa; and an undergraduate English major, Austin. The mission of the Scholar Collaborative was to tap into the historical literacies of Black authors to honor Black students' poetry writing and identity development.

This commitment to supporting GEAR-UP students' awareness of the power of their current and historical narratives led to the curricular choices for the Scholar Collaborative. The focal poets we explored included Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez and Tupac Shakur. Each week we introduced a mentor poem and engaged in discussions with students about the author of the poem and students' reflections. The sessions took place in an Oakbridge classroom during an hour the school designated as "college hour". When students entered, we greeted them, engaged in a brief check-in, and introduced students to the focal poet and poem. During our

introductions we checked students' background knowledge about each poet, provided additional information about each poet's life, and integrated digital media clips about their lives or their oratorical performances. We transitioned into distributing copies of a work of poetry by each focal author. Scholars read each poem individually, annotated, and subsequently turned and talked through their analyses with one to three other students. They could then spend the remaining time writing their response poems, which they often finished at home. Given the short class time, our poetry analysis typically spanned several days.

GEAR-UP Scholars

A total of 27 ninth-grade students participated in the Scholar Collaborative. In an effort to engage in an in-depth analysis, I chose to highlight the poetry of two GEAR-UP students, Nyla and Brandon. Multiple students in the Scholar Collaborative created poetry illuminating important aspects of their lives, yet Nyla's and Brandon's poems illustrate the challenges to their identities as a result of bullying and teasing, and their journey to self-love. Although I would have preferred to feature all students' poetry in this piece, space limitations prevent a deserving analysis of each powerful piece that students wrote within the Scholar Collaborative.

Nyla and Brandon were both ninth-grade, high-achieving students at Oakbridge who maintained grade point averages above 3.5 and exhibited active GEAR-UP participation. Nyla's participation in GEAR-UP began during her seventh-grade year with the program's inception at her middle school. She maintained consistent attendance at all GEAR-UP events throughout the year, both in her school and at Jordan University. She presented a quiet yet inquisitive demeanor and dreamed of becoming a chef. Brandon's participation in GEAR-UP began in ninth grade when he transferred to Oakbridge.

During the Scholar Collaborative he maintained active participation, was considered very charismatic, and emerged as a leader not only in the Scholar Collaborative, but also throughout the entire GEAR-UP program.

Data Collection

During the study I collected the following data: student-written poetry, weekly field notes, video-recorded classroom sessions, interviews with student participants, and copies of the course curriculum. I engaged in multiple informal conversations with both Brandon and Nyla across the two months of the seminar. I conducted one formal interview with Brandon and one with Nyla at the end of their participation in the program, which lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. I developed a semi-structured questionnaire (Seidman, 2006) comprised of questions related to their overall school and GEAR-UP experiences. These questions included: “Tell me what your experiences have been like when you’ve come to the college campuses”; “Do you think it is important to read texts from African American authors?”; “Do you feel like you’ve benefited from participating in the Scholar Collaborative and if so, how?” I conducted their interviews within one month of their final participation in their last GEAR-UP summer camp before they transitioned to tenth-grade. The featured focal writing samples include a total of four poems: two poems written by Brandon and two written by Nyla.

Data Analysis

I relied on narrative analysis (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004) given the primary focus on understanding

Brandon’s and Nyla’s poetic narratives. Narrative analysis consists of focusing on the stories that research participants tell through oral and written communication. When engaging in narrative analysis, Lieblich et al. (1998) encourage researchers to analyze both the content and form of narratives. In relation to Brandon’s and Nyla’s poetry, I analyzed both the content of their poems and the style and form of their poems, including their usage of metaphors and rhetorical devices. In analyzing their poetry, I engaged in line-by-line coding. These codes then served as maps for each of their poems, which led to the construction of themes for their individual poems and experiences. I subsequently compared the codes and themes within each poem, followed by a

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comparative analysis of their first and second poems in which I documented connected, new, divergent, or explanatory concepts/themes across their poems (Miles et al., 2014). I focused on putting each form of data in conversation in an effort to weave together a more comprehensive understanding of the Scholar Collaborative and Brandon and Nyla’s experiences

as participants.

The first research question required attention to pedagogical practices within the Scholar Collaborative. Thus, I used their responses to research questions that focused on the structures of the Scholar Collaborative that resonated with them. I coded words such as *relates*, *inspires*, and “*remind us that our voice is powerful*” as *validating pedagogical actions*, which I developed into the first theme acknowledging *Pedagogical Practices Validating Students’ Identity & Fostering their Writing*. As I coded Brandon’s and Nyla’s interviews and poems, I focused on recurring words including: *judge*, *question*, *tease*, and *bully* that I coded as *naming*

obstacles. I coded phrases including “*stop you from being who you want to be*”, “*don’t really get the chance to know you*” as *impacts of obstacles*. I connected these codes to the second theme: *Naming & Navigating Life Challenges that Can Stop You from Being Who You Want to Be*. This theme focuses on Brandon’s and Nyla’s ongoing commitment to naming and facing their life obstacles, particularly bullying and teasing. I categorized phrases from their poems including “*I just put on my love vest*” and “*why fear love?*” under the theme of *invoking self-love*. I transformed these codes into the third and final theme, *Moving Closer to Self-Acceptance & Self-Love*. This theme focuses on how Brandon and Nyla began to form more positive dimensions of how they saw themselves and came to understand the importance of loving what their peers and society constructed as flaws. Within the section that follows, I discuss the first theme, which highlights pedagogical practices; and the second and third themes, which focus on Brandon’s and Nyla’s poetry.

Findings

Findings from the analysis fall into three areas: the pedagogical practices that validated the students’ identities and fostered their writing, the naming and navigation of challenges that can prevent identity formation, and the possibilities for moving closer to self-acceptance and self-love.

Pedagogical Practices Validating Students’ Identity & Fostering their Writing

Throughout this section I detail the significance of the overarching GEAR-UP philosophy, the specific philosophy of the Scholar Collaborative, and pedagogical practices instituted for the creation and implementation of the Scholar Collaborative. This particular finding connects to the first research question through which I explore the elements of the Scholar Collaborative that fostered students’ poetry

writing. Within the Scholar Collaborative, Black students’ identities, histories, and interests were rooted in the overarching educational philosophies that GEAR-UP embraced, which functioned to affirm Black students’ identities. According to Gutiérrez (2008), within Third Spaces there must be a documentation of how dominant structures are re-organized and how critical movement occurs in such spaces. I detail how developing program philosophies rooted in students’ history and identity, integrating historical and contemporary texts, and drawing on language practices to affirm Black intellectual thought demonstrate a re-organization of dominant classroom spaces. Third Spaces must also consist of historicizing practices that connect students’ pasts and present, rather than ahistorical practices (Gutiérrez, 2008). Below is an excerpt from the mission statement exemplifying GEAR-UP’s commitment to situated students’ education within a historical context:

Students [will] gain awareness and understanding of their identity and personal power through exploring their personal and cultural histories [that fosters] a broader contemporaneous perspective on their being in a way that enhances pride about their being.

Within the context of all national GEAR-UP programs, Jordan University’s mission is noteworthy given its intentional focus on honoring students’ identity, culture, history, and pride. In addition to the philosophy, GEAR-UP chose the Sankofa adinkra symbol as a logo for its programming. Adinkra symbols originated in West Africa, specifically Ghana among the Akan tribe, and carry an important message or principles by which to live (Dzokoto et al., 2018). Sankofa represents the importance of connecting to history and translates as: “go back and fetch it.” For GEAR-UP, this concept of remembering

history and integrating it into the future extended past simply the use of the Sankofa symbol.

In addition to this historical grounding, GEAR-UP staff focused on providing programs directly connected to students' interests, academic, social, and cultural needs. Thus, GEAR-UP staff regularly checked-in with administrators, parents, teachers, and students about the type of programming they were interested in. Prior to the construction of the Scholar Collaborative, through an informal conversation with students, we began discussing the types of books and authors they typically explore in school. Students struggled to name school-based opportunities that offered sustained opportunities to deeply study Black authors. They recognized this as an imbalance to which GEAR-UP responded by creating a new curriculum. In the interview excerpts below, Brandon and Nyla respond to the question: Have you had opportunities throughout your classes to explore Black poets and write your own poems in response?

Brandon: You know what? We might have done that in a class and if we have, I cannot remember . . . so I don't think we did it a lot.

Nyla: Like in our English class, we like, the vocabularies that we have, we have to like make a poem or something and we have to use those words in it so like it helps us to get like the meaning of the words and what type of ways to use them.

Brandon's response demonstrates his struggle to name and identify sustained engagement with Black authors. Nyla remembers creative practices that her teacher employed connecting poetry to vocabulary. However, this example is not specifically rooted in exploring Black authorship and poetry. As is demonstrated in the literature review, practices that de-center Black history and the multiple literacies

that Black students' use to make sense of their lives pervade many classrooms, thus highlighting the need for counterspaces. Nyla detailed the type of literacy practices that both resonated and did not resonate with her, which we took into account in developing the Scholar Collaborative:

Nyla: Sometimes like if it's a book . . . that's not quite interesting, it'll make me not want to read it, but if it's interesting or if it relates to life now, therefore, I'll be more open to reading it. . . . I like writing. Like I like to do poetry and write songs and rap, stuff like that.

Writing poetry and rap and being provided the opportunity to connect with written material that resonated with her, and promoted Nyla's desire to write and share her writing. In an effort to create a curriculum that continued to foster students' desire to write, we solely focused on the lives, experiences, and poetry of Black poets as a guiding principle. We selected four primary texts authored by Black poets including: "The Rose that Grew from Concrete" by Tupac Shakur (1999); "Put on the Sleeves of Love" by Sonia Sanchez (2009); "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou (1978); and "As I Grew Older" by Langston Hughes (1926). The goal in selecting texts written across time spanning from 1926 to 2009 was to provide an opportunity to explore Black peoples' historical and contemporary experiences and honor Black poetic excellence. These intentional text selections served as curricular opportunities to infuse topics and authors that resonated with students' identities and realities (Flores, 2018). In an effort to understand whether or not these pedagogical choices influenced Brandon and Nyla, we asked them if they believed our choices were important to their development. They responded as follows:

Brandon: I think it's important because sometimes, just, just being an African American author inspires me because I'm an

African American, too, so. . . It's like, maybe they have something that relates to what I'm going through or maybe I should listen because . . . like when I heard the Tupac thing, I'm thinking Tupac had a pretty rough life because where he grew up at, what he says in his songs. So I'm like maybe it's better to listen to an African American author.

Nyla: Well, yeah, because it'll help you, especially like if you learn differently, it'll help you in a positive way to understand [what] to write about, to take the time.

Brandon spoke to the importance of connecting with authors who share similar experiences. For Nyla, the Scholar Collaborative fostered an ability to choose relevant topics that were meaningful to her. Nyla embraced the opportunity to study and write poetry, becoming one of the most avid writers in the group. In addition to centering Black poets as catalysts for strengthening students' belief in the power of their voices, we instituted several practices to foster this understanding. Each day, prior to students engaging in poetry analysis and writing their own poems, Dr. Malcolm, the program director, recited the following mantra with them: "My voice is powerful. My voice is beautiful." We chose this practice to reiterate the value of their voices, contributions, and experiences. During our interview, I asked Brandon and Nyla to discuss the parts of the Scholar Collaborative that resonated with him, if any. In response, they focused on their ability to strengthen their voices:

Brandon: I remember how Dr. Malcolm used to [remind] us that our voice is powerful, our voice is beautiful and things like that, so it really made me think about my voice and how I could be creative with it or help others with it. So that's what I thought.

Nyla: Yeah, because like your voice is a powerful weapon to where like if someone hears you, understands you, if you use your voice in a certain way, you will be heard.

The reminders about the power in his voice and story, as well as the ability to create poems based on his experience, allowed Brandon to tap into this power. Nyla's growing belief that her voice also wielded power like a weapon manifested in her decision to perform her poetry as a means to verbally fight back (McArthur & Muhammad, 2020). Through the semester, she rarely shared her poetry out loud in the large group (Scholar Collaborative field notes), but by the end of the semester she decided to perform her poetry as detailed later in the Findings.

In addition to practices including the daily mantras, we instituted creative forums to discuss the poems. As part of our unit analysis of "Put on the Sleeves of Love," we read the poem as a large group and subsequently provided the space for students to read and process their thoughts silently (Scholar Collaborative field notes). Afterward, we convened in a circle in the back of the room to debate their positions on choosing between love and fear as the greater emotion. Below is an excerpt from my interview with Brandon where he recounted his experience with the debate and his process for determining his physical and philosophical stance in relation to choosing the most powerful emotion.

Brandon: We did like a division thing, like whoever thought love was more powerful, go on that side of the room. Whoever thought fear was more powerful, go on this side of the room. We all had to explain why and I remember that I was confused so I was kind of in the middle until later on. I think I moved to love.

We mixed several traditions by creating a debate circle and a cypher, acknowledging how hip-hop and rap traditions are rich manifestations of Black literacy and poetry that many Black Youth employ (Hill, 2009; Love, 2012; Rawls & Petchauer, 2020). Several students would form cyphers or circles in the hallways or outside where they could showcase their artform through friendly back and forth battle. Nyla was a student who enjoyed rapping. We thus constructed the debate circle as a cypher where each student could step into the circle and share their perspective uninterrupted. As Brandon discussed above, stepping into the debate cypher provided the opportunity to use his voice to articulate why both fear and love resonated as a result of his challenges. His physical decision to choose the side of love in the debate metaphorically speaks to his ability to “move to self-love” from his experiences with bullying, as further detailed in the following sections.

Naming & Navigating Life Challenges that Can Stop You from Being Who You Want to Be

In this section I highlight Brandon and Nyla’s poetry, which demonstrates the naming of challenges they experienced, including being bullied and teased. The poems included in this section were created during a Scholar Collaborative unit where we engaged in an analysis of Maya Angelou as a feature poet and highlighted “Still I Rise,” a canonical poem that speaks to themes including pride in racial identity, ancestral roots, race and racism, and resilience. We anticipated that analyzing “Still I Rise” would allow us to explore the historical and contemporary challenges that Black people face, the power of their existence, and their determination to thrive. During our discussions with scholars about the poem, themes of identifying, dealing with and overcoming obstacles resonated most significantly. Within this theme, I engaged in a discussion focused on Brandon’s and Nyla’s experiences with teasing and bullying, and how these experiences impacted their

self-concepts. To elucidate the significance of this theme, I highlight Brandon’s poem, “I Got Over It,” followed by Nyla’s poem, “Who Am I?”

“I Got Over It”: Brandon

Being bullied by bullies it never stuck to me I got
over it
Having trouble making friends turned into having
too many friends
And just when I thought my problems would end, It
started all over again, but I got over it.
Having surgery never hurt me, writing sloppy never
stopped me
And just when I begin to quit, I just remember to get
over it.
Because a thinking man is a successful man
And even though I get over it and get over things
again and again and again,
My problems always start over again, but eventually
I’ll get over it.

Brandon powerfully began his poem by naming a significant obstacle, being bullied. He continued throughout the poem to name three additional obstacles he experienced and overcame, including writing challenges, surgery, and difficulty in forming friendships. He also engaged in repetition, acknowledging the significance of “getting over,” or overcoming obstacles. He demonstrated not a defeating understanding of the recurrence of challenges in his life, but an understanding of the power in his strength and intelligence to support his endurance.

While all of these experiences significantly impacted Brandon, his experiences with “writing sloppy” and “being bullied” appeared again in our interviews and his second poem. He later revealed that “writing sloppy” served as a metaphor for dyslexia. During the interview, I asked Brandon to discuss his relationship with reading and writing, to which he responded:

“Reading and writing. Okay, I think I’m a wonderful reader and with writing, I can write real good but I write sloppy because a long time ago, I had dyslexia.”

The first part of Brandon’s response evidences his positive self-concept as a reader and a writer. The second part of his response sheds light on his journey through living with dyslexia. In spite of the challenges he faced reading and writing with dyslexia, he was committed to sustaining a positive relationship with both. He noted receiving tremendous support and encouragement from his mother and father, who continually advocated for his academic success. Brandon’s strengthened ability to become a better writer and reader provided him with the confidence to move forward in spite of dyslexia.

Here I acknowledge the power in Brandon feeling safe enough to name and speak about such challenges, given how the voices of young Black Men are marginalized in school and society (Everett, 2018). As Brandon details, he arrived at a point where having dyslexia did not inhibit his success as a writer and a student. In fact, he began to self-identify as a wonderful writer, establishing his own poetic style or poetic cool. In their scholarship that lifts up the languages and literacies of Black boys, Kirkland and Jackson (2009) ask, “what blends of sound and substance figure into the language of cool?” (p. 280). Brandon’s language of cool resided in an ability to tell his story through effortlessly using consonance and assonance, rhetorical strategies where consonant and vowel sounds mimic rhyming. In “I Got Over It,” these rhetorical features are visible in the lines: “writing sloppy never stopped me, having surgery never hurt me.” Brandon’s rhythmic poetry writing also appears in the subsequent section.

Similar to Brandon’s naming of the obstacles he experienced and overcame, Nyla also acknowledged obstacles she faced including judgement and teasing. In a slightly different form, she also established her

own rhythm and poetic cool. Through the poem “Who Am I?” she journeyed through these experiences while clearing up misunderstandings about who she really is.

“Who Am I?": Nyla

Who Am I? That’s the question a lot of people ask.
Now let me think...
Who Am I? I’m that shy girl that you call rude
because I don’t like being in front of a lot of people
Who Am I? I’m that girl that you always see
blushing and laughing
Who Am I? I’m that pretty, fat girl as society would
say
Who Am I? I’m that smart, intelligent girl that you
love to hate on
Who Am I? I’m that multi-threat that people love to
hate
Who Am I? I am a creation made in my Father’s
image. I breathe the breath of an honest God. I bleed
the blood of a loyal God.
So now tell me, Who Am I? Since you know so
much.

Nyla demonstrated the weight of her identity being questioned as she noted “a lot of people ask” or question who she is. For Nyla, it became clear she had endured a long-standing battle with resisting hurtful words that impacted her body image. In more personal parts of our interviews and her writing that I have omitted to maintain her privacy, she mentioned that many of the comments often centered around her physical appearance. Nyla experienced difficult moments sharing space with her peers who teased her. She actively shared classroom space in the Scholar Collaborative with her peers, both male and female, who teased her, demonstrating the tensions that can occur inside Third Spaces (Gutiérrez, 2008). We created a culture where students understood the ground rules of using language rooted in respect and care. We also

addressed harm when it appeared, engaging both with students who were the initiators and students who were the recipients including Nyla. However, Nyla had already endured the harmful impacts of being teased, one of which was a quieting of her voice. For Nyla, building the confidence and self-love to face her peers was a growing undercurrent visible in her participation and poetry that ultimately proved to be transformational.

Through her poem “Who am I?”, Nyla pushed back against antagonizing peers. Stylistically she engaged in a rhetorical call and response, back and forth of sorts where she asks, “Who Am I?”, acknowledging the ways her peers and society attempted to impose inaccurate representations of her identity. Her poem shifted as she began to describe herself through her eyes and in relation to God, similar to how Maya Angelou (1978) articulates her connection to the power of her ancestors. Nyla spent the next few lines reminding society and her peers who she really was. As she ended her poem, she strategically employed the rhetorical question, “So now tell me, Who am I, since you know so much?” to dare her peers who had judged her to counter her powerful words. The content of Nyla’s poem, her decision to share it with the class, and her performance demonstrated a tremendous amount of growth and strength, as her poem is both a dedication to self and an example of her speaking truth to judgmental peers.

Nyla also used a particular style of using questioning embraced by mentor poets Angelou (1978) and Shakur (1999). Shakur begins his poem with a question: “Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete?” (stanzas 1-2) and draws on the content of the poem to answer the question, which serves as a counter narrative and survival story about the rose, a metaphor for Black youth. In “Still I Rise”, Angelou (1978) poses four questions: “Does my sassiness upset you? (stanza 2); Did you want to see me broken? (stanza 4); Does my haughtiness offend

you? (stanza 5); Does my sexiness upset you?” (stanza 7). Through these questions she talks back to society, naming and affirming why her existence as a Black woman matters. In her first poem Nyla repeats the rhetorical question “Who Am I?” and similarly talks back with her answers. The question that closes her poem, “So now tell me, who am I?, Since you know so much,” serves as a dare for her peers to “come for her” or attempt to tease her again.

In Smitherman’s (1973) pivotal scholarship that honors and unpacks the significance of Black oral traditions in the form of rhyming and rap, she notes, “verbal performance becomes both a means of establishing one’s reputation and a teaching/socializing force” (p. 6). Nyla’s intentional placement of this rhetorical question in the culminating line of the poem served as a mic’ droppin’ mechanism, or a mechanism signaling to her peers that nothing else needed to be or should be said. She used this rhetorical device to construct herself as a resistor as many Black girls do when given the space to do so.

Moving Closer to Self-Acceptance & Self-Love

Through a second unit analysis, we studied poet Sonia Sanchez and one of her contemporary poems that opens the paper, “Put on the Sleeves of Love,” which provided a natural structure for a debate on whether or not fear or love represented the most powerful emotion. Our students enjoyed debating, and so I drew on their desire to debate and hoped my selection would spark a lively conversation. As a result of the debate and study of the poem, several students created poems about the power of love, their experiences with receiving love externally, and forming self-love. For Brandon and Nyla, their response poems in relation to the challenges they experienced with teasing and bullying, represent how they strengthened their self-love or moved closer to love, as Brandon later articulated. I assert that the

pedagogical love employed within the Scholar Collaborative, as demonstrated within the first finding, made room to honor Black students' self-love, appreciation of self, and confidence in who they were as individuals connected to rich Black lineages. The Scholar Collaborative also encouraged the growth of students' confidence and self-love by giving them permission to explore personal challenges, love, fear, protection, and transformation, as evidenced in Brandon's response poem, "Love Is Like" and Nyla's response poem, "Emotion."

"Love Is Like": Brandon

Love is like a warm blanket
On a cold night or like a cold sprite
When it's just right.
Love is Priceless, especially when it
Comes to someone's heart,
Because You must be invited.
When the Haters are shooting at me,
I just grab my love vest,
Wipe the comments off my
Chest and tell others
I am blessed

Brandon began his poem by invoking the warmth of love, which he continued to do throughout, embodying images of what love actually feels like. As he continued, he employed symbolism and metaphors to further describe love. His poem tapped into his senses, particularly through the physical sense of feeling or touch and the emotional aspect of feeling. He illuminated his positive feelings about love and beliefs about the power of love, particularly in providing protection and relief. He likened love to experiences that elicit positive feelings, such as possessing a warm blanket as protection from the cold, and a Sprite when it is the perfect temperature. As Brandon progressed in lines 5-6, he articulated the importance of inviting love in and putting on his "love vest." In order to protect himself from bullies,

he constructed an invisible love-vest, a powerful metaphor for his confidence and self-love, operating as his emotional armor.

It is important to provide context and connect this poem with his response to participating in the debate cypher. Within the first theme, I detailed how the debate cypher resonated with Brandon as he contemplated whether fear or love should prevail as the stronger emotion. He ultimately decided to side with love and provided support for his decision in the interview excerpt below:

and the reason I moved to love is because if you love something, you're willing to do anything for it or for someone so I feel like that was really powerful. But I also felt that fear was powerful because fear will stop you from being who you want to be or it'll stop you from doing certain things. Like for example, like sometimes kids get bullied and it stop them from academic success so I was thinking like about both of those, I couldn't really choose.

As Brandon detailed, his personal experiences as the kid that experienced bullying whose identity and academic success was almost interrupted, pulled him toward choosing fear. However, he remembered the power of his self-acceptance and self-love, which ultimately overpowered his fear. It not only supported him through the challenges named in his poems, but led him to physically move to love in the debate cypher. Although Brandon did not elaborate on all that helped him to recover, in the end his love vest repelled his bullies, and provided the space for emotional recovery. This emotional recovery required a self-invitation of love and grace to find comfort in his own skin by "grabbing his love vest, wiping the comments off his chest and telling others he is blessed." Similar to Sanchez, who uses the concept of "putting on" the hands, feet, and mouth of

love as protection, he also metaphorically put on emotional armor, repelling the comments that “haters shot at him.” Although much of Brandon’s healing pre-dated his participation in the Scholar Collaborative, it provided him with the space and permission to name these challenges in a way that he had not previously.

While Brandon focused specifically on love in his response poem, Nyla used her poem “Emotion” to grapple with the complexities of both love and fear, which paralleled her discussion in the debate cypher. By putting “Emotion” in conversation with her experience of doubting herself as a result of being teased, she demonstrated a growth in confidence and self-love.

“Emotion”: Nyla

Love is such a powerful
Emotion
It can make you do anything.
I guess that’s why most
People Fear it.
But it’s nothing to be afraid
Of. Because love is something
That just comes natural.
So why Fear love?
It’s just an emotion...

Through “Emotion,” Nyla articulated her thoughts about the power of love. In lines 1-2, she expressed an understanding of how love’s intensity could induce fear due to its capacity to cause people to do anything. Simultaneously, she also questioned why people fear love’s intensity, since in her opinion, it is simply an emotion. This question not only functioned as an outward-facing question, directed at her audience, but also as an inward-facing question, directed at herself. This ability to recast the questioning gave her a means to explore her greatness and stand in it. Exploring love as a simple

emotion helped her to emerge as a more confident Nyla. In order to better understand how Nyla’s confidence and self-love grew, while fear of her bullies lessened, I followed up in our earlier interview by asking why she chose to focus on her personal experiences with teasing and bullying as detailed below:

Nyla: Because people are always judging someone, when they like never really get the chance to know them. They’re just judging them off of how they look.

Theda: And do you feel like that’s something that you have struggled with and you’re sort of gaining more confidence to sort of be okay in those moments when you hear or feel like people are judging?

Nyla: Yeah, because I just push it to the side because they’re not gonna help me get a job, they’re not gonna help me go to college or anything like that.

In this excerpt, Nyla commented on how she processed the negative judgment of her peers. As demonstrated in our dialogue, Nyla began to relinquish the power her peers had taken away. In this specific context where we also engaged in discussions about college and connected students to the possibilities of college in their lives, she began to refocus on her identity as a future college student. Her responses demonstrate a realization that peers who teased her could in no tangible way contribute to her future success or the strengths she already possessed. She was comfortable with GEAR-UP instructors reading and discussing her poetry individually or in a small group of peers whom she trusted, but not in the larger group. During our second to last session, we asked students to raise their hands if they were interested in performing during our celebratory session, and ten hands emerged in

the air; Nyla's was not one of them. I worried she would miss the opportunity to share her powerful writing during the Scholar Collaborative. After class I encouraged her to consider sharing her poem, and in response she smiled and replied, maybe.

On the day of students' performances, I figured Nyla decided to forego her performance, since we had time for one more student to perform, and she had not volunteered. We were pleasantly surprised when she quietly yet confidently emerged and proceeded to the front of the classroom to perform "Who Am I?" The room was speechless, including peers who teased her. Her decision to stand at the center of the room and raise her voice commanded attention and demonstrated a transformation in her confidence. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the bullying she experienced stopped impacting her negatively because of her performance. However, her peers' and society's negative words began to weaken, or rather she weakened their words with her self-love and love vest. She seemingly started to fear her bullies less and love herself more, as demonstrated in her last poem, where she compels her reader to reconsider fearing love.

Discussion

As is demonstrated throughout the findings, The Scholar Collaborative educators were explicitly dedicated to supporting the academic success of Black students. Gutiérrez (2008) details multiple components of Third Spaces that include: transformation at the individual and systemic level; critical and positive movement relative to students' identities; embodied language practices; and historicizing literacies. Below I detail how these elements of Third Space resonated throughout the

pedagogical structure of the Scholar Collaborative, and Brandon's and Nyla's poetry and experiences.

The Scholar Collaborative adopted pedagogical practices that situated students' history and contributions as central assets to the curriculum as opposed to deficits and afterthoughts. These practices align with Third Space, since Gutiérrez (2008) reminds us that within Third Spaces, ways of knowing are expanded to acknowledge students and communities overlooked as purveyors of knowledge. Within the Scholar Collaborative, Black poets, Brandon and Nyla, and their peers, were honored as purveyors of knowledge as Black high school students. These curricular choices to honor the historical contributions of Black writers demonstrates an aspect of what Muhammad (2020)

"She was teaching, rather schoolin' her peers that her definition of her identity mattered and not the one they attempted to impose on her."

conceptualizes as *historically responsive literacy*. I position historically responsive literacy as a demonstration of the historicizing literacies Gutiérrez (2008) details in Third Space. Implementing historically responsive literacy supports students' identity development,

and the sustainment of their literacies and histories. It also supports culturally sustaining pedagogies, given that "culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 95). In discussing the impact of connecting Black youth to Black literacy excellence, I return to Sanchez's poem that opens the manuscript. Similar to Sanchez's experiences, such spaces can provide inspiration for Black youth embracing their own literacy genius due in part to the historical and contemporary models of Black writers whom they have the opportunity to study.

Loving by Embracing Black Youth Literacies

Not only do spaces such as the Scholar Collaborative connect Black youth to the legacy of Black poets, but they also serve as catalysts for their own writing that details personal parts of their lives. Findings speak to how the two focal students, Nyla and Brandon, employed poetry in part as a tool to both articulate challenges they experienced impacting their self-concept, and to successfully navigate their path through these obstacles. The Scholar Collaborative allowed them to connect with the significance of poetry writing in the Black community, and also to connect with each mentor poet through reading, analyzing, and discussing their poems. This process then became inspiration for their own writing.

Within Third Spaces, Gutiérrez (2008) notes the importance of attending to “a rich interactional matrix, constituted by a range of language and embodied practices, including particular grammatical practices” (p. 149). In this way, Brandon and Nyla embody Black oral tradition, rhythmic forms, and questioning and answering as a means to socialize their peers and audience about who they really are. Nyla used her poetic performance to reclaim her reputation and identity as worthy, beautiful, and more confident. She was teaching—rather schoolin’—her peers that *her* definition of *her* identity mattered and not the one they attempted to impose on her.

Nyla, equipped with her love vest, was empowered with a strengthened sense of self-confidence that allowed her to physically face her teasers through poetry, demonstrating a transformation in her confidence. As Tatum (2014) posits, “meaningful experiences with texts cause adolescents to feel differently about themselves, affect their views of themselves and others, or move them to some action in their current time and space because of ethnic, gender, personal, or adolescent connections with the

texts” (p. 37). This movement or transformation at the individual student level that occurs in Third Spaces (Gutiérrez, 2008) was visible in their ability to articulate challenges to their self-concept and the growth of their self-love, in ways they had not previously done. Brandon’s experience acknowledges the importance of providing Black male students with educational spaces where their own literary excellence can be supported and strengthened to safely share their experiences in school and society, which are often overlooked (Everett, 2018). We must embrace Black male students with support to successfully navigate through their unique experiences, and poetry-writing can serve as one of these cathartic tools. Acknowledging how Black male students write about love and deserve love to support their well-being also counters dominant messages that fail to consider love from and for them (Duncan, 2002).

Exploring the importance of love for and from Black girls also deserves significant attention. Nyla needed a platform and opportunity to release her feelings about how others made her feel about her body in a way that made sense for her. This affirmation is particularly important, given how Black girls contend with societal messages attacking their bodies, attitudes, and existence (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Harrison, 2017). As Butler (2017) asserts, “in these spaces, we come to recognize the work of Black women as vital to an ongoing quest for liberation for all oppressed persons, especially marginalized women” (p. 174). Engaging with Black women’s poetry fostered a sense of liberation and healing in Nyla visible in her poetry performance. Although I am unsure of the exact causes of her transformation, I make room for the possibility that being in a space where we validated her voice contributed to her transformation and deeper exploration of self-love. Nyla’s experience reminds us that Black girls deserve educational spaces that contribute to their healing and formation of positive body images (Cariaga, 2019;

McArthur & Lane, 2018; Price-Dennis et al., 2017). In discussing their healing, while poetry can be a part of this process (Harper et al., 2009), it must not serve as a singular remedy. It must exist in concert with counseling support that honors the mental and emotional well-being of Black youth as a primary focus.

Addressing Tensions in Third Spaces

Although pedagogical love flowed throughout the Scholar Collaborative, I acknowledge additional tensions. I explore individual transformation, which is a component of Third Space, yet do not as fully detail systemic transformation as is a critical component of Third Space (Smagorinsky, in press). Systemic transformation did not occur in the form of a sustained Scholar Collaborative that became a core component of curricula. However, I acknowledge that systemic transformation occurred at Oakbridge, visible in the administrators' acceptance of the Scholar Collaborative, not simply as a one-day event, but as a semester-long course. The administrators who were gracious partners welcomed us back to sustain the course. However, Oakbridge High School was closed the following year as a part of the dismantling of the school district. We continued working with Brandon, Nyla, and several students over the summer in a second program where they created community change proposals for creating community gardens, park beautification, and school-based mentorship programs.

Additionally, although Brandon and Nyla connected with the Scholar Collaborative, two students did not find the space comfortable for similar reasons. To acknowledge challenges that influence the duplication of such spaces, it is necessary to acknowledge students for whom the space was inaccessible. Curtis was a student who participated in the first few sessions, but eventually chose not to stay. As the reading and writing increased, Curtis' quiet

embarrassment of his difficulty in reading and writing on grade level prevented him from staying with us. Despite our efforts to work with him individually, to encourage him, and to make modifications, he would always greet us with his beautiful smile but never stay.

Implications: Love Is Primary at This Particular Point in Time

While we must consider the Brandons and Nylas, who can soar when provided with spaces like the Scholar Collaborative, we must also consider students like Curtis. These are students who are brilliant but have been underserved by schools and do not feel comfortable in spaces dedicated so heavily to reading and writing in ways that trigger academic vulnerabilities. In returning to Sanchez's poem, I ask what it means for educators and schools to understand that "love is primary at this particular point in time" as it has always been to support the histories, literacies, and lives of Black youth? As Duncan-Andrade (2009) confirms, the type of love and hope that is needed is not passive and only visible in words intended to assuage those experiencing marginalization and even those committed to transforming school spaces. What is needed is active, radical love and hope (Ginwright, 2015) visible in school philosophies and curricula that transform systems of oppression and move teachers and teacher educators toward humanizing, pedagogical acts of love, hope, and affirmation (Beymer et al., 2020; Paris & Winn, 2013). Thus, as educators we must ensure that school-based spaces that allow Black youth to dialogue with Black poets, to philosophize and share what they feel personally led to share, exist and are sustained. These spaces can be transformative in helping students to feel empowered and connected, and also to serve as confirmation that their lives matter.

At Oakbridge, brilliant and beautiful students like Brandon and Nyla were eager to write and possessed ideas they needed to put in poetic form. However, they lacked access to school spaces that celebrated and strengthened their appreciation for studying and writing poetry. While I have positioned the Scholar Collaborative as a Third Space, I firmly assert that such spaces should not operate as alternative spaces inside schools, but as permanent fixtures embedded within dominant curricula as opposed to an add-on

or a temporary fixture. In merging the words of Sanchez, Brandon, and Nyla, we must remember that love is such a powerful emotion and can transform school spaces to refuges for Black students. Thus, love is primary at this particular point in time. As we move forward as educators, we must put on our Love Vests, ensuring that we love Black students through our words, and literacy-based curricula in ways that usher safe journeys toward academic success and overall well-being, always.

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