The University of Texas at Austin
Texas Education Review
College of Education

Journal Homepage: Texas Education Review
Published online: February 2025
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To cite this article: Jackson, J. J., & Carter, A. (2025). Restoring the land: Pro-Blackness as a healing force against anti-Black classroom management. *Texas Education Review, 13*(1), 171-190. https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/58398

Restoring the Land: Pro-Blackness as a Healing Force Against Anti-Black Classroom Management

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the systemic harm inflicted on Black students through anti-Black classroom management and disciplinary practices, positioning Pro-Blackness as a transformative framework for healing and justice. Grounded in healing justice and African Diaspora Literacy, the discussion highlights the pervasive impact of the "white gaze" in perpetuating inequities and the urgent need for educators to reject Eurocentric standards. The authors argue for a shift from punitive to Pro-Black classroom management practices that affirm Black cultural dimensions and foster holistic growth. Integrating strategies for self-reflection, relational accountability, and the inclusion of Black-centered pedagogy provides a roadmap for educators committed to creating equitable, affirming spaces for Black students. The paper ultimately challenges educators to engage in collective action to "heal the land" by honoring the humanity and potential of Black children.

Keywords: Pro-Blackness, healing justice, classroom management, Black students, equity

In his speech at the 2024 Democratic National Convention, Senator Raphael Warnock solemnly shared, *"And the question is, who will heal the land?"* He spoke in the context of a divided America, but as I listened, as always, I thought about it concerning Black children in schools in America. I pondered *who will heal the land for Black students* being punished for being Black in school spaces. How is the land damaged, one might ask? First, establishing the context of "the land," the reference comes from a Bible verse that refers to God healing the promised land riddled with misfortune due to their sin. In contrast, we argue the healing of the land in an educational context refers to removing barriers and systematic school discipline policies and practices that interfere with Black students' ability to enjoy their promised land, an equitable education.

While we discuss various aspects of education, our focus is specifically on how classroom management practices have harmed Black children, the resulting disciplinary consequences, and what we propose as an antidote to these issues. Black children have been victims of anti-black violence in schools for decades. To be abundantly clear, while we will have some discussion about Black children's historic victimization through school discipline, this is by no means a new phenomenon, albeit seemingly no substantial progress has been made. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) assert that schools are a space where whiteness asserts "the absolute right to exclude" (p. 60). This exclusion is evident through the systemic and strategic policies and practices like separate but equal and now private school vouchers. This absolute right to exclude also continues to protect the white-centered curricula and forces the exclusion of Black[1] histories in their purest form. We emphasize the *purest forms* to acknowledge how Black histories, knowledges, culture, and being have been omitted, distorted, and romanticized; thus, students received ill-informed information (Boutte, 2016/2022; Jackson et al., 2021). As a result, we seek a *healing of the land* for Black folx.

[1] While we recognize that other minoritized groups experience similar issues, this paper deliberately focuses on Blackness and its specific challenges.

In our quest for healing, we emphasize bell hooks' (2000) notion that healing cannot occur in isolation. While there is a need for some individualized healing, there is an abundant need for collective healing for Black communities as Black folx are communal (McNeil-Young et al., 2023). For Black folx to heal, the first step is to escape the white gaze (Ilmi, 2011) and reject the eurocentric standards that are established as the goal. hooks (2015) contends that the white gaze (as she calls the voice of judgment) is a tool by which dominant cultures maintain control. As a result, Black folx never feel that they have done enough; it is akin to the popular statement *you have to work twice as hard to get half as far*. We resist these notions and seek healing.

Drawing on humanitarians such as Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, Ginwright (2015) positions *healing justice* as seeking "(a) collective healing and well-being, and also (b) transforming the institutions and relationships that are causing the harm in the first place" (p. 38). We use this as the framework for which we have based the healing journey of this paper. Throughout, we focus heavily on *transformation*. Transformation of systemic policing while also transforming our communities. Guided by *healing,* we begin this paper by examining what we seek refuge or healing from. From there, we explore the self-work educators must do to prepare for a healthy classroom community. We leave readers with a few classroom application examples.

Toward Healing: From Anti-blackness to Pro-Blackness

We start by addressing the well-articulated literature concerning Black students and school discipline. School discipline encompasses a structured set of actions, policies, rules, and procedures aimed at regulating student behavior to ensure adherence to societal norms (Williams, 2024). Scholars over time have situated schools as sites of lynching (Woodson, 1933), sites of spirit-murdering (Love, 2014), exclusionary spaces (Greene, 2012), carceal (Williams, 2024), and sites of black suffering (Dumas, 2014), among others. Black children historically have suffered from unfair treatment, adultification, and misinterpreted cultural expressions. We consider all of these actions as forms of anti-black racism and anti-black violence interchangeably. We draw on Dumas and ross (2016) conception of anti-blackness as the idea and lived reality where Black people endure social harm and must constantly push back against it. It differs from racism as it's a deep-rooted belief system that views *Blackness* as something negative, not fully acknowledging Black people as individuals and positioning them as the opposite of everything considered pure, humane, and White (Comrie et al., 2022; Dumas and ross, 2016). Dumas (2016) went as far as to ensure the use of a lowercase 'b' for Black in anti-blackness, as it refers to the social construction of blackness and not the vibrance of the living experiences of Black people.

Anti-black violence in schools is the lens through which we analyze students' experiences and as a reference when deciphering shared data. Johnson et al. (2019) describe anti-black violence through five categories: (1) physical; (2) symbolic; (3) linguistic; (4) curricula and pedagogical; and (5) systemic school violence. For context, Table 1 describes each type and contains real-life examples as depicted in news media.

Table 1

Examples of Anti-black Racism in Schools

Type of violence	Definition	Example
Physical	The use of force and physical harm driven by racist attitudes and biased beliefs.	*GA elementary school staff member accused of striking only black students for not charging laptops.* (https://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/georgia-elementary-school-staff-member-accused-of-striking-students)
Symbolic	A figurative representation of the abuse, pain, and suffering inflicted on the spirit and dignity of Black people due to racial discrimination.	*A Black student was suspended for his hairstyle. The school says it wasn't discrimination* (https://apnews.com/article/hairstyles-dreadlocks-racial-discrimination-crown-act-034a59b9f2652881470dc606b39e5243)
Linguistic	The restriction and regulation of Black voices and how they express themselves. This often involves the marginalization of Black language or African American Vernacular English while promoting mainstream white English.	*Teachers banned slang after hearing too much 'rizz': A helpful lesson or 'anti-academic'?* (https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2024/08/23/teacher-bans-slang-in-classroom/74901822007/)
Curricular and Pedagogical	The harm caused by school curricula that prioritize European perspectives and spread false narratives about Black people, reinforcing negative stereotypes and marginalizing Black knowledge.	*A course meant to inspire more Black students to take AP classes sparked a culture war instead* (https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/fight-ap-african-american-studies-black-students-are-left-rcna74175)
Systemic School	This harm is deeply rooted in the systems, practices, language, traditions, rules, and laws of schools, often reflecting racist and dominant ideologies.	*Judge narrows Black students' race bias case against Georgia school district* (https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/judge-narrows-black-students-race-bias-case-against-georgia-school-district/DRP73DH7YJCU3OJ4JE3FJGCEVE/)

These examples of anti-black violence just begin to tell the story of the experiences of Black children in schools. As a result of this violence and other school discipline practices, Black students have been subjected to discipline at far higher rates than their peers. To illustrate this discrepancy, we look at Georgia's public school enrollment data since we (authors) are Georgia teacher educators

and are most intimately familiar with this data. We recognize that this issue is a large scale issue across the United States and ask readers to explore the data of their communities.

According to the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement's K-12 Student Discipline Dashboard, Black students comprised 37.5% of the overall population in 2023 but accounted for 54.3% of those disciplined. In contrast, white students comprised 34.7% of the overall population yet represented only 25.4% of those disciplined. These figures underscore a troubling racial disparity in school discipline, where Black students are disciplined at disproportionately higher rates than their White counterparts, even when their populations are similar. Data like this raises questions about the reasons behind the discrepancy and its potential consequences.

Research consistently suggests that implicit bias, systemic racism, and punitive disciplinary policies disproportionately target Black students. For example, Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) found that teachers often perceive Black students as more disruptive than White students for the same behaviors, leading to harsher punishments. These biases are reinforced by zero-tolerance policies that fail to consider the context of student behavior, particularly when it involves Black students.

School discipline practices tend to exclude students from direct instruction with little to no rehabilitation back into the school communities. Toro & Wang (2021) report school discipline creates a sense of alienation and unfavorable school climate for black students. These punitive measures not only alienate students but also remove them from valuable instructional time, exacerbating the academic disparities that already exist.

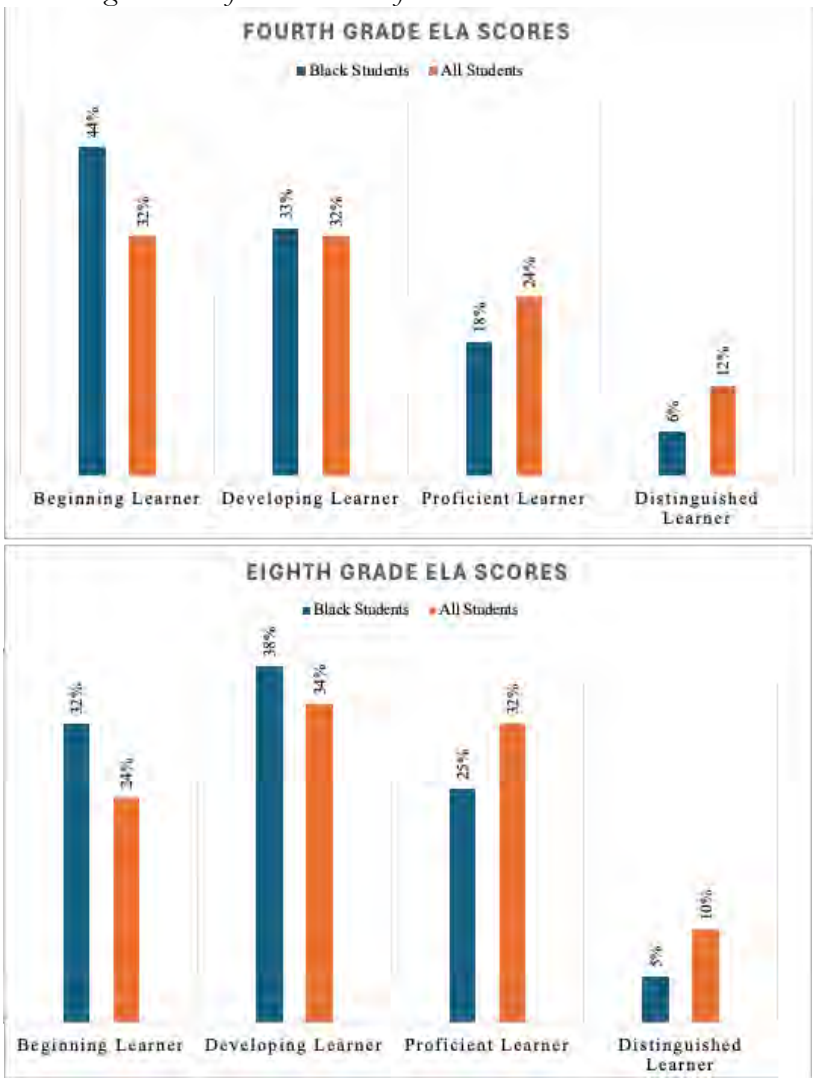
When considering consequences that interfere with learning, it is alarming that Black students in Georgia are the majority in the top three categories that typically come to mind: in-school suspension (50.5%), out-of-school suspension (62.2%), and expulsions (59.5%). These consequences remove students from active teaching and learning, preventing students from being actively engaged in learning. This not only disrupts learning but also leads to what has been referred to as the "school-to-prison pipeline," a phenomenon in which Black students, who are disproportionately disciplined, are funneled into the criminal justice system at higher rates (Milner et al., 2018).

The overrepresentation of Black students alienated from classrooms, coincide with poor performance on standardized tests and other academic performance indicators. Research has found that Black students who are frequently disciplined have lower academic achievement scores and are less likely to graduate on time (Arcia, 2006). To illustrate this, we compare school discipline data to end of year testing for two midpoint grades, fourth and eighth. Figure 1 illustrates how Black students' academic success has been hindered by overdisciplining with subsequent classroom exclusion.

Gregory et al. (2010) reaffirms, school disciplines, interferes with Black students' academic achievement, making a direct connection to racial disparities in school discipline to the commonly referred to "achievement gap." We recognize that discipline is not the sole factor, but we emphasize its impact in this article. The frequent removal of Black students from learning environments compounds other challenges they face, such as limited access to high-quality educational resources, lower expectations from teachers, and economic disparities (Milner et al., 2018).

Figure 1

2023 English End of Course Scores for GA 4th and 8th Grades



Before continuing, we challenge readers to pause and research their state's discipline data to understand this ongoing phenomenon personally. The alarms have been sounding; this is evidence of a land in need of healing; the question is, what will we do? *How do we address and work toward liberation for Black students in educational spaces?*

Anti-Black Classroom Management

Having established a clear understanding of anti-black violence, we want to discuss how these acts of violence show up in classrooms as anti-black classroom management. The National Council on Teacher Quality reports many teacher education programs fail to adequately prepare teacher candidates with evidence-based classroom management strategies (Greenberg et al., 2014). Their report indicates, classroom management is often not given directly, rather, it is woven throughout other aspects of the curriculum. This leaves students to rely on what they observe in practicum

experiences and to lean on their personal perspective, which many teacher preparation programs ask students to reflect on.

Traditionally, teachers have set classroom rules, norms, and expectations before students come on the first day of school. These are set with the teacher in mind, often following their idiosyncrasies, ignoring the needs of the students sharing the space. Thus, teachers find themselves in power struggles with students. Lisa Delpit (1995) describes the *culture of power,* dissecting the many aspects of power in classrooms, bringing light to the idea that "those with power are frequently least aware of- or least willing to acknowledge its existence. Those with less power are often more aware of its existence" (p. 24). She explains how teachers (often white women) are unwilling to engage in conversations that threaten their power and fail to *listen* to the suggestions for the appropriate use of that power. As a result, Black students often do not receive the environment or instruction that is conducive to their learning. Moreover, they are frequently punished for being Black. This failure to critically reflect on their use of power leads to an educational environment that is not conducive to the learning of Black students, who often experience discipline disproportionately. As Sinha (2023) elaborates, the power dynamics in the classroom are reflective of broader societal norms that privilege certain ways of speaking, behaving, and interacting, often marginalizing students of color. This disconnect between student experiences and teacher-imposed norms contributes to Black students being punished for cultural expressions that do not align with dominant classroom expectations.

Understanding *punished for being Black* requires understanding Black culture and the ways of being. Without cultural understanding, teachers misinterpret actions and interactions with Black students, often defaulting to disciplinary action. Reflecting on our time in classrooms in various roles, we offer this anecdote as a hypothetical situation to consider.

> In a classroom, Mr. Anderson notices that Malik, a Black student, has been whispering with a friend while he is giving instructions. Frustrated, Mr. Anderson calls Malik out in front of the class, saying, "Malik, do you have something more important to share with everyone?" Malik's body language changes immediately. He crosses his arms, leans back in his chair, and responds sharply, "Why you always coming at me?"
>
> From Mr. Anderson's perspective, Malik's response seems disrespectful and defiant. However, Malik's reaction is shaped by his cultural experiences. In his community, respect is earned and mutual—if he feels disrespected by how he's called out, he's more likely to respond defensively. To Malik, being singled out in front of his peers feels like an attack on his character, and he doesn't want to appear weak. So, instead of backing down, he pushes back.
>
> Without considering Malik's cultural background, Mr. Anderson may interpret the behavior as insubordination, missing the deeper issue—that Malik is reacting to what he perceives as a disrespectful public call-out, and is trying to protect his dignity in front of his peers.

Some interpretations of this interaction include considering this situation as a means of not holding students accountable. We want to be abundantly clear we by no means expect students not to be held accountable. Still, we ask readers to consider the ways by which they handle situations, honoring students' humanity at the forefront of every situation. As readers continue this journey, reflect on how they can engage with students without dehumanizing them.

Anti-black violence in classrooms shows up often through other classroom management strategies that ignore individualism in students. While potentially beneficial, packaged programming does not account for accommodations for students struggling to maintain the expected behavior. Think about the neurodivergent student (diagnosed or not) who has trouble sitting down or staying still. This also could be exhibited in a desire to be in their own shell and not interact with anyone, including the teacher. That student is immediately disadvantaged simply because their brain is wired differently. Students with behavior disorders like EBD, LD, and ADHD are highly likely to be excluded or deemed to be defiant by teachers (Krezmien & Leone, 2006).

In contrast, a student who is neurotypical and thrives from sitting in one spot is considered a star behavioral student. Using cookie-cutter strategies, the neurotypical child is praised, while the neurodivergent student is categorized as a behavioral issue. The question is, *how can we engage all students in a way that meets their needs?*

We all have stories that we can share of moments when our classroom management systems were anti-black. As Black scholars ourselves, we have been guilty of this as well, acknowledging the crucial notion that Black folks too can be anti-black and engage in intentional and unintentional anti-black behaviors. Rather than stagnating in these ideas, we transition to investigate the transformation to Pro-Black classroom management.

Pro-Blackness in K-12 Classrooms

Pro-Blackness steps back and marvels at the beautifully brilliant existence of Blackness. It embodies pride, like James Brown's anthem, "Say it LOUD, I'm Black and I'm Proud." It fuels the hopes of the youth through Nas's rap, "I know I can be what I wanna be." It flows through the poetic pen of Langston Hughes, who boldly declared, "I, TOO, am American." It radiates love like the warmth felt at a family reunion or Big Mama's house on a Sunday afternoon. It's smooth, like a Soul Train line, and fierce, like Beyoncé or Saucy Santana commanding the stage.

Pro-Blackness is an unwavering and unapologetic love for all things Black, from our African origins to the rich expressions of contemporary diasporic living. The communal nature of Pro-Blackness honors individual expression while ensuring the well-being of all, especially the children. Pro-Blackness is relational and shows love and support even when it has to be *tough love.* For a formal definition, we refer to Pro-Blackness as "an unapologetic, positive, proactive perspective regarding Blackness and Black people" (Boutte et al., 2024, p. 24).

In the classroom, Pro-Blackness is just the same; it is a commitment to the well-being of children through the use of Black centered community building, content, and pedagogies. Boutte et al. (2024) share African Diaspora Literacy as a mechanism to create a pro-Black classroom. African Diaspora Literacy (ADL) seeks to build literacy about Black people throughout the diaspora and their worldviews and epistemologies (Boutte et al., 2017). African Diaspora Literacy is conceptualized on the foundation of key African, Afrocentric, and Black scholars such as Asa Hilliard, Molefi Kete Asante, Joyce King, Gloria Boutte, and LaGarrett King (see Boutte et al., 2024). A key aspect of ADL is learning should be about and *from* African diasporic people. The emphasis on *from* is significant as we should tell our stories, as when others do, it becomes a distorted view that omits essential aspects and often hides our existence (Boutte et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2021). This is evident in the curricula schools use that romanticize Black histories, and when fearful, they (white

folks, often politicians) omit them under the guise of *divisive concepts*. Pro-Blackness (re)directs us to seek out what is *right* about Blackness against the backdrop of anti-black violence in schools.

African Diaspora Literacy contains four harmonious components: Black historical consciousness themes (King, 2020); African values and principles (Jackson et al., 2021; King & Swartz, 2016); Black cultural dimensions (Boutte, 2016; 2022; Boykin, 1994); and Historical and contemporary perspectives (Boutte, 2016; 2022). These components are in no particular order but essential (Boutte et al., 2024). Considering these components in the classroom management context, we bring attention to the Black cultural dimensions: *spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, oral tradition, social time perspective, perseverance, and improvisation* (Boutte, 2022). These dimensions reflect Black cultural ways of being as expressed and observed worldwide. We bring attention to these because these ways of being, engraved in Black DNA, are how Black students show up to schools every day. Table 2 shares how these ideals show up in classrooms daily.

Table 2

Black Cultural Dimensions

Dimension	Definition	Classroom Example
Spirituality	A view of life that focuses on energy and vitality, believing that unseen forces affect human experiences.	Encouraging students to practice meditation or other spiritual practices throughout the day when they see fit.
Harmony	The idea that everything in life is connected, and people should live in balance with nature and others.	Including lessons that teach respect for the environment and fostering connections between people and nature.
Movement	Physical activity, rhythm, and dance are seen as crucial for mental and emotional well-being.	Incorporating activities like dancing or rhythmic exercises to energize students during lessons.
Verve	The ability to bring energy, enthusiasm, and liveliness into one's actions.	Using dynamic and hands-on activities to keep students actively engaged and energized in their learning.
Affect	Focusing on emotions and being aware of feelings, emphasizing expressing them openly.	Having classroom discussions where students can openly share their emotions and experiences promoting emotional literacy.
Communalism / Collectivity	Building a sense of community where individuals recognize their responsibilities to others and work together for the collective good.	Creating group projects that emphasize teamwork, shared responsibility, and collaboration among students.
Expressive Individualism	Encouraging people to develop their own unique identity and express themselves authentically and creatively.	Assignments that allow students to showcase their individuality, such as personal narratives or creative presentations.

Table 2

Black Cultural Dimensions

Oral Tradition	Emphasizing the importance of speaking and listening as forms of communication, often using vivid and creative language.	Encouraging storytelling and oral presentations where students use expressive language and performance skills.
Social Time Perspective	Viewing time as something that is shaped by social interactions and personal experiences making it flexible and unique to each person.	Being flexible with deadlines and understanding that students might approach time differently based on cultural contexts.
Perseverance	The determination to keep going, even when things get tough, and to bounce back from challenges.	Praising students for their hard work and resilience, particularly when they overcome obstacles or setbacks in learning.
Improvisation	Adapting to situations by creating new, culturally relevant solutions, helping individuals reclaim their cultural identity.	Allowing students to adapt or improvise during work, encouraging creative problem-solving and cultural expression.

With these ideals in mind, we continue to explore what pro-Black classroom management looks like in classrooms, starting with the characteristics of the teacher.

Checking Our Heart, Mind, and Actions: Characteristics of a Pro-Black Classroom Community Educator

"T've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." -Maya Angelou

As educators, we have a big responsibility in the healing of the land. While we are usually not involved in policy development, there are things in our control that we can change. We want readers to start with within. In the healing process, there are some pains in the realization of the impact of unintentional actions, some of which come from personal experiences or upbringing. I, Jarvais, had this realization in my first year of teaching. I was born and raised in the South, with very traditional and religious parents and family. Thus, there was a strict hierarchy between children and adults requiring things such as mandatory use of *yes ma'am/sir* and *no ma'am/sir*. I took that same idea into my classroom. I remember wanting to take on the persona of Mr. Clark from *Lean on Me*. With that mindset, I ended up having many power struggles with students. One student was adamant about not saying yes/no, sir. As the big bad teacher and self-proclaimed King of the castle (the classroom), I pulled the student into the hallway and called his mother. The discussion I had with his mother was the ah-ha moment that I needed. She informed me that given their ways of being, as native northerners, she did not require him to say those pleasantries at home. Then, I realized I was fixated on the wrong issues. Respect could be established in many different ways, and my fixation on such a minute issue interfered with not just that student but all students. At that point in my career, I began asking myself, *does this [insert behavior or expectation] impact students' learning, or is it just my stubbornness?* We don't always get it right. As such, that situation, and similar ones, led and continues to lead me to critically reflect on:

- How has this power struggle interacted with me in my past students?
- How many students did I isolate or alienate because I wanted power more than I wanted them to learn?
- Whom did I hurt so much that I caused a wound that they are still walking around with?

My parents, like many readers, would probably not agree with this concept, but I share to emphasize that there are so many ways of being as people. In this case, I, a Black male teacher, and the student, a Black male, while sharing the identity as Black males, have different experiences and understandings of the world. Blackness is not monolithic and requires continuous engagement as culture is dynamic.

Frequently, there is a focus on what the student is doing wrong, while educators rarely reflect on practices and policies that are detrimental to students. Furthermore, we often fail to acknowledge the humanity of children, as evident in the anti-Black violence that occurs. We recognize that such statements may be resisted, as educators may feel defensive; this is a natural reaction. We intend to encourage educators to consider some customary practices we engage in that unknowingly dehumanize students. Here are a few examples of how we impose unrealistic and, in some cases, dehumanizing expectations on children in schools:

- No talking during instruction, while working, in the hallways, and during lunch.
- No eating outside of lunchtime.
- Obey without questioning.
- Limited allowances for restroom breaks.

We must first remember that students, like all children, are still developing and have various needs—movement, socialization, and exploration. These are expectations that even teachers cannot fully meet within the constraints of a school day. For example, at any faculty meeting, we observe these same behaviors: colleagues engage in side conversations, work on tasks unrelated to the meeting, and snack to stave off hunger. This is simply human nature. We thrive on interaction, focus on what we find relevant, and resist mindlessly following instructions without understanding the "why." Children, whose bodies burn off food almost as quickly as they eat it, may experience real hunger during the day. While some rules exist to maintain order, some are merely in place for control.

As a Pro-Black educator, it's essential to critically evaluate these rules and policies to create a humane environment for our students. This sometimes means closing the door and doing what is best for the students we serve.

Just as students show up differently in classrooms, so do educators. There is no one way to be a Pro-Black teacher. However, we can share two profiles as examples: warm demanders and joyful warriors. Regardless of their style, Pro-Black educators exhibit certain characteristics: they are culturally relevant in all aspects of teaching, maintain high expectations for their students (Boutte, 2016/2022; Ladson-Billings, 1994), honor Blackness in their classrooms, and are unafraid to challenge the status quo. Rather than attempting to control students, they create an environment that fosters teaching, learning, and holistic growth (Boutte et al., 2024).

At the heart of Pro-Black teaching are relationships. While these relationships may look different from one classroom to the next, they are essential for success with students and their families. As

Rita Pierson (2013) reminds us, "Kids don't learn from people they don't like." While some teachers may feel that a child's approval isn't their concern, gaining that connection could be the key to eliminating behavioral issues, reducing power struggles, and fostering academic success.

Warm Demander

In the ongoing battle against anti-Black educational policies, educators are called to be more than just teachers—they must be relational practitioners for Black students, restoring, rehabilitating, and mending previous experiences and pedagogies used in classrooms. Educators must embody "tough love" as your favorite neighborhood Auntie or Grandma would do when you were out of line. It is an exceptional 2-step dance, gliding on the line of accountability and love. This "dance" is the "Warm Demander." The warm demander concept offers a powerful model for combining high expectations with deep, culturally informed care. As described by Lisa Delpit, these educators recognize that "nothing makes more of a difference in a child's school experience than a teacher" (Delpit, 2012). Warm Demanders view their students as "diamonds in the rough," capable of brilliance when given the push and support they need. (Delpit, 2012). Moreover, Ladson-Billings (1995) describes the need for teachers to build strong, trusting relationships with students that make room for establishing and enforcing high academic expectations. These educators also understand that Black students are capable of success and deserving of a learning environment that recognizes and nurtures their brilliance. These educators do more than teach; they advocate, support, and celebrate their students' cultural identities, pushing them to excel while ensuring they feel seen and valued.

Reflecting on my (Ashley) time as an instructional coach, I distinctly recall Mrs. Sims, a 4th grade ELA teacher who was engaging but, more importantly, had exceptional relationships with her students. Mrs. Sims had mastered the art of the warm demander dance. Her classroom was choreographed with high expectations and the belief that no student had the option to fail. I can still hear her call and response chant to students, "I Can, I can…I know I can," reassuring students that they can achieve their writing goals for the day. Through implementing her daily affirming class motto, collaborative class community, and no-nonsense loving approach, Mrs. Sims cultivated an environment where her students knew without a doubt that they were to be successful in her class. Truth be told, their success and achievement were a requirement. This is what a warm demander profile calls educators to. We unlock their greatness through a balance of love and the right amount of firm stretching of students in their abilities. Enacting the warm demander in educators can not simply be diminished to avoiding harm, but instead actively creating a space where Black students can flourish, turning classrooms into a refuge where learning and growth can freely occur, regardless of cultural context.

To truly embody the essence of a warm demander, a teacher must master the delicate art of combining steadfast high expectations with heartfelt care. It's about building trust with students while holding them accountable for their growth, ensuring they feel both challenged and supported. This approach blends firm, clear communication with empathy, all while deeply respecting and incorporating students' cultural backgrounds. In doing so, teachers create a space where students not only strive to meet academic and behavioral goals but also feel valued and understood as individuals. By honoring their cultural identities, teachers inspire students to rise to their full potential with confidence.

The challenge is clear, but educators can be a part of the healing! By embracing the role of a Warm Demander—one who refuses to let systemic barriers and preconceived notions define students' futures—teachers commit to doing the work and upholding pro-Blackness in the classroom. Additionally, by embracing the Warm Demander philosophy, Teachers can transform their classroom into a place where Black students are not just merely surviving in a barren land but thriving in a land of milk and honey, where they are challenged, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential making our schools a promised land of equity and excellence for every child.

Joyful Warriors

Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff described his wife, Vice President Kamala Harris, as a *joyful warrior*. He emphasized this by stating, "And here's the thing about joyful warriors: they're still warriors." When I think about joyful warriors in the classroom, I remember my third-grade teacher, Ms. Dowling. She always had a smile on her face. As a white teacher in an almost entirely Black school, I imagine she faced some learning curves. Reflecting on my time as her student, I realize she rarely seemed upset. Her classroom was a space where we learned in ways I had never experienced before.

In my district, third grade was when students were identified for the gifted and talented program. I remember Ms. Dowling's persistence in ensuring I was included in that group. Although people always told me I was smart, this was the first time I truly felt smart. Despite the joy that filled her classroom, Ms. Dowling held us to high expectations. There were no excuses for missing assignments; everyone was expected to be engaged.

Though rare, I saw the warrior side of Ms. Dowling emerge at times. As with any group of third graders, there were moments when we fell short. Ms. Dowling didn't hesitate to shift gears and remind us of her expectations when that happened. Sometimes, that meant less or no recess or other adjustments to the joyful environment we had become too comfortable in. Joyful warriors are the ones who would say, "I am nice, but don't take advantage of me." They remind people that beneath their kindness, they are ready to fight when necessary.

As a joyful warrior, one recognizes the many things to feel anxious, frustrated, or discouraged about, yet chooses to focus on potential. Joyful warrior teachers acknowledge the inequities their students face but don't let those challenges dampen the joy in their classrooms. They create spaces where students can momentarily forget the obstacles against them and instead focus on how bright their futures are. I saw this in Ms. Dowling, too. My school was in a rough neighborhood, and much of the violence in the city happened around us or involved people who lived in the area. Still, I never remember feeling less than. In my research since then, I have learned that reports indicate that the school didn't meet specific standards. Yet, the teachers and administration fought to ensure students had the resources they needed, all while shielding us from the struggles behind the scenes.

Ms. Dowling's approach as a joyful warrior exemplifies the qualities of a pro-Black educator. Though not Black, she demonstrated a deep commitment to her Black students by acknowledging our challenges while affirming our potential. Pro-Black educators recognize that teaching goes beyond the curriculum; it's about affirming Black students' dignity, identity, and brilliance in a system that often fails to see them as such. Ms. Dowling worked to create a space where our identities were seen, valued, and nurtured. She understood that her role wasn't just to teach

academics but to help us see ourselves as capable, intelligent, and deserving of opportunities, even in a society that might tell us otherwise.

While the term "joyful warrior" is relatively new, the concept has long been present in Black culture. Toni Morrison highlights the emotional and psychological toll of enduring constant cycles of anger and resentment. Without dismissing the validity of these emotions, she reminds us of the importance of finding and nurturing spaces of love and joy, which are essential for healing (Morrison, 2020). She advocates for balance, urging Black people to fully experience life, focusing on thriving rather than merely surviving—resonating with the pursuit of joy amidst struggle. Teachers, as joyful warriors, must model this balance, creating classrooms that center both high expectations and spaces of joy for their students.

Schools as Sites of Love: Characteristics of Pro-Black Classroom Community Environments

Having an environment conducive to teaching and learning is essential for any classroom, but when that space is a communal space, there is room for holistic growth, both socially and emotionally. As with types of teachers, there is no singular way to create this environment. Some spaces will feel like Big Mama's house, while others might feel like the favorite auntie or uncle's house. What is clear is that shared values are established (Boutte et al., 2024), love is present (Baines et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2019), and mirrors are provided for students (Sims-Bishop, 1990). We share two conceptualized spaces, sanctuaries, and brave spaces, that exhibit what a Pro-Black space can look like.

Sanctuaries

Smith (2022) conceptualizes sanctuaries as *truth spaces* where individuals can "come as [they] are" (Smith & Jackson, 2024, p. 17). Sanctuaries were conceptualized through the notion of *radical Black love;* creating a space where Black language is celebrated, Black authors and thoughts are the guides; and Blackness is centered. Smith (2022) describes sanctuaries as sacred places where students can be vulnerably and authentically themselves. These spaces allow and require individuals to *be*. Although this may seem rudimentary, many people—students and teachers alike—lack the space to be genuinely themselves, particularly against the backdrop of racism and other marginalized identities. In sanctuaries, these identities are recognized and affirmed, encouraging some form of expression to release or heal. Sanctuaries allow authentic self-expression through poetry or other forms (Smith, 2022).

Sanctuaries critique social inequities while embracing "otherness" and advocating for change. Their uniqueness lies in their dual function: they can serve as a hospital for some, offering healing while providing a platform for others, all within a space of "resilience, rejuvenation, and revitalizing education" (Smith, 2022, p. 23). At their core, sanctuaries are spaces of mutual love and respect.

While sanctuaries are magical, they are not without accountability. Within these communities, members are held accountable while receiving the necessary support to achieve their goals. As Smith and Jackson (2024) emphasize, "When sanctuary spaces are not created, educational institutions become reproducers of social inequities" (p. 16). Smith (2022) intentionally avoids rigid definitions of sanctuaries, viewing them as spaces without boundaries. She conceptualizes sanctuaries as defining places that help individuals *become* by first allowing them to simply *be* (D. Smith, personal communication, August 27, 2024).

Brave Spaces

Many educators strive to create a classroom that is a safe space where every individual can thrive by existing unapologetically and feeling affirmed (Howard, 2024). However, in some cases, the concept of safe spaces can lead to stagnation in the pursuit of safety. Howard (2024) challenges educators, especially those focused on equity, to broaden their approach from safe to brave spaces. Brave spaces require boldness, essential for transformative education (Howard, 2024). These spaces demand collective reasoning and action and an equally important commitment to self-evaluation. The critical dialogue within brave spaces necessitates vulnerability, honesty, and action. Howard (2024) contrasts safe and brave spaces, noting that while safe spaces might be "cordial, respectful, [and] congenial," brave spaces are "respectful, but challenging at times" (p. 6).

Everyone has a role to play in brave spaces, and this responsibility extends beyond the four walls of the classroom. It requires participants to speak up, even when they might not ordinarily do so. In brave spaces, disagreement is acceptable, and this can be fostered through strategies like accountable talk. Through accountable talk, students collaborate to tackle challenges, uphold guidelines that promote participation, and take responsibility for ensuring accuracy in their discussions (Resnick et al., 2018). In practice, this involves active listening, respect, and reasoning. Students must go beyond relying solely on their own thinking and instead use resources to support their arguments. Conversations might sound like, "I disagree with you because..." or "The point you made is valid, but have you considered...?"

In the context of Pro-Blackness, teachers must recognize that banter is a cultural expression that may include features like overlapping dialogue, which should be accommodated within accountable talk. Teachers, too, must be open to receiving accountable talk, even when it is uncomfortable (Howard, 2024). Practices like this enhance teaching and learning and prepare students for global citizenship. It is within brave spaces that growth occurs, even when accompanied by growing pains.

Bringing it All Together: Classroom Application

Having addressed educators and their spaces, we conclude by sharing examples of how Pro-Black classroom management looks in classrooms. It is important to note that classroom management or community building cannot be done in isolation and should include healthy relationships (as discussed in the educator section), environments (as discussed in the previous section), and curricula (Boutte et al., 2024). Holistically, it is restorative, unlike traditional punitive approaches, and focuses on the whole child. In each example, readers will see the social, emotional, and academic supports in place and elements of the Black Cultural Dimensions within.

Talk to Me Journals

Talk to Me Journals (Jackson et al., under review) provide a private space for personal reflection while also serving as a medium for communication between students and their teachers. These journals can be used in various ways, primarily encouraging students to reflect before reacting. I encourage students to release their thoughts and feelings on paper, especially when they prefer not to share with others. Journaling is a liberating and emancipatory task, enabling students to write meaningfully, centered on self (Dunn, 2021; Muhammad, 2012). It reinforces writing standards while providing a context that fosters self-efficacy and honors the "legacy of liberation struggle" Black people have experienced through reading and writing (hooks, 2013, p. 161).

While implementing Talk to Me Journals class-wide may not always be feasible, they can be effectively used with individual students who struggle to express themselves or need emotional support. For some, it becomes a safe haven and a source of resilience. Muhammad (2012) reflects on the experience of a Black girl involved in a writing institute where journaling was integral: "Writing was a means to escape. There are limitations in the physical world that there aren't when you write" (p. 208). With the removal of the need for political correctness, students often find it easier to experience freedom in writing (Muhammad, 2012). When using Talk to Me Journals, I always inform students of their freedom of expression while explaining my obligation to report certain disclosures. Despite this, students feel free to be open, honest, and vulnerable.

Community Conversations

Defining a classroom community is complex and dynamic. From familial nature to neighborhood feels, classroom communities should always be collectively conceptualized and happen naturally when space is made for relationships amongst all community members. As maintenance, we suggest incorporating regular time(s) for the class community to discuss grievances, progress, collectiveness, and critical dialogue (Jackson, 2023). Sometimes described as family meetings, these regular convenings extend beyond traditional morning meetings. These conversations are spaces where honest conversations about the real issues of the classroom or issues outside of the school may be impacting members.

These conversations will be needed as we cannot overromanticize the realities of classrooms and the behaviors that students bring. While some will be mitigated with the use of some of these strategies, there will be some behaviors that will remain an issue. With a foundation of relationships, the use of community conversations provides moments for members of the community to respectfully address problems or concerns that may have come up, expressing their feelings. This is also a time for the teacher to make amends for harm caused, receive feedback, and mediate conversations amongst peers. Readers can read about an example of community conversations in Jackson's (2023) *Starting with the Man in the Mirror: A Black Male Teacher's Use of African Diaspora Literacy to Reckon with Black Consciousness.*

Integrating Cultural Materials

Integrating cultural materials into the classroom is vital for supporting Pro-Black classroom management, as it helps create an environment where Black students feel seen, valued, and connected to their learning. Furthermore, it showcases the abilities of Black folx against the backdrop of mistold histories. By embedding resources that highlight the rich history, traditions, and contributions of the Black experience into the curriculum, educators not only validate the identities of their students but also foster a sense of belonging that is crucial for students' social, emotional, and cognitive well-being. When students observe their culture reflected in the content they engage with, it empowers them to take pride in their heritage and strengthens their connection to the material (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019). This connection leads to higher levels of engagement, as this allows learning to feel relevant and applicable to their lived experiences.

Although many teachers consider integrating cultural materials as adding inclusive book experiences, this integration can be much more dynamic than just text. As a classroom teacher, I (Ashley) would make it a point to embed and highlight Black histories in my teaching. For instance, in a Science

lesson on light/electricity, I would highlight Benjamin Franklin (as required by state standards) but also speak to the pivotal role that Lewis Latimer played in creating the filament that made lighting practical and affordable for consumers. This technique of intertwining pertinent facts, people, and places relative to the black experience allows students to "See themselves." Socially, this reflection promotes a communal environment where students can celebrate their culture together, building solidarity and mutual respect. Emotionally, it affirms students' identities, helping them develop a positive self-concept essential for resilience in the face of systemic challenges. Academically, these culturally relevant moments can bridge the gap between students' existing knowledge and new content, making learning more accessible and meaningful (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In this way, integrating cultural materials is not just an educational strategy but an act of empowerment.

Self-Reflection and Accountability

Accountability is a fundamental aspect of being Pro-Black. Without it, communities struggle to thrive, facing internal and external harms. Any approach to accountability must begin from within. Guiding students to take that first step of self-reflection places the responsibility on them to evaluate the impact of their actions and identify any harm or potential harm caused. Students might begin by considering reflection prompts, with adapted versions for younger students, such as:

- What did I do? (What happened?)
- How do my actions impact myself and others? (How did my actions make others feel?)
- Did I cause harm to anyone or anything? My plan to repair the harm is… (Did I hurt anyone or anything? How can I help fix it?)
- What could I have done differently? (What can I try next time?)
- My commitment moving forward. (What promise can I make to do better?)

From the responses, teachers should have reflective conversations with the student(s), including sharing wisdom, and should create necessary restorative plans. With the cocreated plan, the student is held accountable for future occurrences, repeating these steps when necessary and appropriate.

Conclusion

We conclude by challenging readers to ask themselves: *Will I help heal the land?* This work is essential not just for Black children but for all children. As Senator Raphael Warnock reminds us, we strive for "a nation that gives every child a chance," understanding that when Black children thrive, others also thrive. We reject the notion that Pro-Blackness is a zero-sum game. Supporting Black children does not come at the expense of others; instead, it acknowledges the truth that "if you're pro-Black, you are actually pro-everybody, because you can't be pro-everybody if you're not pro-Black" (Suarez, 2022, p. 11).

We cannot sit idly by and expect transformation to happen for Black students. This does not work for Black educators alone but for all committed to justice and equity. Engage actively with materials that center Blackness in classrooms, such as resources on Pro-Blackness (Boutte et al., 2024; Braden et al., 2022; Williams, 2022; Wynter-Hoyte, 2022), teaching Black history (King, 2016, 2020), and other Black-centered pedagogies (Boutte et al., 2023; Muhammad, 2020; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022). These resources are not just tools but essential frameworks that can guide educators in creating spaces where Black students can thrive.

There is no singular approach to Pro-Black classroom management; its dynamic nature requires educators to continuously reflect on their practices and adjust as necessary to meet the needs of their students. This ongoing work demands difficult self-reflection and the willingness to relinquish power, ensuring that all students, particularly Black students, are supported in a way that honors their dignity and potential.

Black children need healing, and this work is neither simple nor swift. It involves addressing generational trauma as well as confronting contemporary inequities. Healing is not just a task for individual students but a collective responsibility that requires the engagement of educators, families, and communities. As hooks (2000) reminds us, "Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion" (p. 215). We must recognize that our collective well-being is intertwined, and by working together to support Black children, we contribute to *the healing of our land*.

Dr. Jarvais Jackson, Assistant Professor of Culturally Responsive Education in the Department of Elementary and Special Education, centers his teaching philosophy on equity, inclusion, and the potential of all students. He creates spaces where future educators feel empowered to engage critically with social justice in education. Grounded in African Diaspora Literacy and pro-Black pedagogies, Dr. Jackson prepares teachers to honor diverse experiences and commit to culturally responsive practices.

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