

How Do We Inspire the

NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

to Serve Today?

A Conversation with Dr. Will Miles and Dr. Charlotte Smarte



DR. ROBERT FOMER

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Youth With a Future

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Introduction

One of our latest Youth With the Future Blogtalk Radio program discussed how we can inspire the next generation of leaders to serve today. The podcast featured Dr. Will Miles and Dr. Charlotte Smarte as guests. It was hosted by Dr. Margaret Fomer and Ms. Ella Anita Graham, Executive Director of S.P.E.A.K (Single, Parents, Empower All Kids)talk show program.

The podcast asked a series of questions regarding igniting passion and motivating the younger generation amid challenges such as the Coronavirus pandemic, social distancing, economic unrest, social unrest, and online classes. It discussed how children and the youth of today are experiencing challenges with respect to their education, their mental health, and the economic uncertainty that confronts them due to their parents being unemployed or other financial challenges. It also explored how YWAF, teachers and counselors can continue to support, encourage, and mentor the youth to explore their full potential.

The hosts asked Dr. Miles and Dr. Smarte to share their personal experiences regarding these issues and the how they would like to inspire and encourage students. The hosts also invited the guests to share suggestions with YWAF on how it can assist and challenge students during this time.

This eBook serves as a collective summary of the discussion and the measures we can adopt to counter new difficulties and overcome obstacles.

About Dr. Will Miles

Dr. Wilbert Miles is a clinical psychologist in Denver, Colorado. Dr. Miles leads his private practice and has worked with numerous children, young adults, and older people. He also collaborates with the athletics department and administration of the University of Colorado.

About Dr. Charlotte Smarte

Dr. Charlotte Smarte is an educator residing in Chicago, Illinois. She has worked with Chicago public schools for over 20 years and has been associated with teaching children in need of special education.

Dr. Smarte is also a national board-certified teacher who mentors other teachers. The Illinois state legislature has lauded her for her efforts to improve learning conditions and practices in Illinois education.

Chapter 1

Identifying Personal Experiences With Issues

We began by discussing personal experiences concerning issues faced by the youth during these times. Both Dr. Miles and Dr. Smarte recounted how these challenges impacted their counseling and educational duties.

Reviewing the Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on Black Communities

Dr. Miles opined that issues related to social unrest, racial injustice, the Coronavirus, and educational difficulties were interconnected in a systemic and holistic manner. In the case of the Coronavirus, it has hit racial minorities disproportionately. Dr. Miles has personally come across families that have been disrupted and destroyed by the illness and the deaths that followed. His sister-in-law and mother also passed away because of the virus. In his words, *“the world as we know it has been forever changed.”*

Younger children have felt the impact of the pandemic in a different way too. Since it’s difficult for them to understand what is going on around them fully, they feel these changes at a fundamental level. The same applies to the youth that may internalize these issues and feel responsible for some of the things their family is experiencing.

In particular, black families that are struggling with economic uncertainty, poverty, and unemployment are forced to bear the worst side-effects of the pandemic socially and financially. Many of these families have been historically poor and need to rely on food banks and other similar programs to meet their basic needs.

These problems have exacerbated greatly since the pandemic, and ultimately, they affect your sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and your visions, hopes, and dreams turn to dust.

Dr. Miles' observations on the black community getting disproportionately hit by the virus are supported by nation-wide studies that observe a similar pattern. As per NPR¹, the death rates for African Americans were higher than the proportion of the population they occupy in 32 states, including Washington D.C. In 21 states, the death rates were 50% higher than normally expected.

Why is that the case, though?

According to the CDC², black communities have been at increased risk of dying from COVID-19 because of the following reasons:

- Unfortunately, there is widespread discrimination in systems designed to protect the health and well-being of the American population. These include housing, healthcare, criminal justice, education, and finance.
- Another contributing factor is the lack of adequate access to healthcare. Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be uninsured. Therefore, they are at greater risk of dying from COVID-19 if their symptoms exacerbate.
- People from Black communities often hold essential jobs in healthcare facilities, factories, farms, public transportation, and grocery stores. As a result, they are at an increased risk of getting exposed to the COVID-19 virus.
- Black communities struggle with inequitable access to a high-quality education, which can hamper their ability to explore lucrative job opportunities. This can create income and wealth disparity and make it difficult for them to switch to jobs that offer more safety against exposure to COVID-19.

¹What Do Coronavirus Racial Disparities Look Like State By State? <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/30/865413079/what-do-coronavirus-racial-disparities-look-like-state-by-state>

²Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>

- People from Black communities are more prone to struggling with poor housing conditions. They may live in crowded conditions, which can increase their chances of exposure to the COVID-19 virus.

Understanding how these factors not only put Black communities at an increased health risk but also influence their mental health and sense of self-worth is essential. Only then can we devise a holistic solution that empowers the young generation and helps them overcome these obstacles.

Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Educational Learning

Dr. Smarte discussed the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on younger children. She teaches middle school children with special eds needs. According to her, the middle school experience can play a fundamental role in a child’s cognitive and emotional development. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has disrupted this process to a large extent.

As children are taking online classes and studying at home, they are being confronted with a fresh challenge labeled as “COVID fatigue.” In simple words, COVID fatigue can be described as a condition where children are unable to get through an entire school day via online classes and end up losing their motivation and desire for learning. She has worked with numerous children experiencing such difficulties. One particular student was hospitalized 3 times due to the emotional disturbance of at-home learning. He could not handle the lack of connection with his teachers and peers during online classes.

Given the seriousness of the condition, Dr. Smarte has posed an important question for educators – what are we doing to address COVID fatigue?

In Dr. Smarte’s case, she normally opts for one or more of the following to help children struggling with this condition:

- **Learn to celebrate a child's strengths:** Instead of focusing purely on academic learning, educators must pinpoint areas where a child appears to be particularly gifted. For instance, a child maybe more artistic than his or her peers, they may enjoy writing, or they may have an analytical mind. Whatever it is, educators can use a child's gift to motivate them. Dr. Smarte dedicates some time to celebrating the students under her care and motivating them at regular intervals to ensure they remain engaged and don't experience COVID fatigue.
- **Engage in emotional and social discussions:** According to Dr. Smarte, sticking to the prescribed curriculum should not be the focal point of online classes. Teachers should not rely on lesson plans alone to get their students through the day. Instead, they should make time for emotional and social contact. Teachers should ask their students how they are feeling, the type of day or week they have had, and if they are facing any personal challenges that interfere with their ability to learn. Being aware of these issues from the get-go can improve your chances of staging an early intervention. Encouraging a child to engage in emotional and social communications regularly can also help improve their mental well-being.
- **Involve parents:** Dr. Smarte also asks parents to keep a close on their child's emotional and social behavior. If they see their child struggling to participate in online classes up to the level that's normally expected of them, then they must inform the school authorities immediately. Parents must also share any difficulties that a child is experiencing while studying at home. Any information provided on this front can help educators formulate a plan to help a child get through this difficult time.

Dr. Smarte also recommends that kids be provided with necessary mental health counseling to address the social and emotional challenges they are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With regards to mental health counseling, Dr. Miles suggested offering children and young adults with necessary tools that can help manage the trauma they have faced in terms of the pandemic and systemic racism. Dr. Miles also stressed the need to arrange sessions with notable leaders of the African American community, so they can share their stories with these children and inspire hope that things can improve.

Chapter 2

Making Changes in Educational System to Empower Black Youth

To initiate real change, we must begin by addressing fundamental problems in the educational system and how they interfere with the progress of Black children in society. Dr. Smarte and Dr. Miles recommended several initiatives that can make this possible. To begin with, they emphasized the need to teach Black history more comprehensively. They also discussed the need for mentorship and how it can help Black students. Let's take a closer look at their suggestions and how they can prove useful for African-American youth.

Teaching Black History to The Youth

African-American children must be made aware of their history. This can allow them to understand who they are, develop their identity, and build a sense of self. It can also lend purpose and help create change. According to Dr. Smarte, it is essential to integrate Black history into teaching. For example, her school recently celebrated Black heritage month. Some of the other ways that can we teach Black history to African-American children include:

1. **Reading:** Children should be given fiction and non-fiction texts written by Black authors. They should also be encouraged to read about historical figures that have enabled change and contributed to the improvement of African American lives. Introducing students to texts by Black authors can allow them to understand Black experiences, perspectives, and accomplishments. For the most part, most African-American children only see Black people succeeding in sports and entertainment. Introducing children to Black intellectuals can widen their horizons and provide them with new role models. In the case of authors, children should be introduced to the works of Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Langston Hughes. They should

also be taught about Martin Luther King Jr., Barack Obama, and other lesser-known individuals such as George Washington Carver and Benjamin Banneker.

2. *Science and Mathematics:* Teachers should reference Black mathematicians and scientists while teaching science and mathematics. This can create awareness regarding the achievements of Black people that are often ignored in mainstream media. For example, Black people had a nuanced understanding of agricultural science. They were able to use this knowledge to grow rice in South Carolina. Teachers can also touch upon the history of math in sub-Saharan Africa. The African people of this region were highly proficient in numerical systems, geometry, and graphs.
3. *Social Studies and History:* Schools should incorporate texts by Black authors in history, social studies, and other disciplines. Student reading lists should also include documents about or by Black people. When teaching students about Black slavery in America, teachers should discuss the acts of resistance carried out by Black people and the economics of slavery. Black youth must be made aware of how Black slavery contributed to the economic foundation of the country and benefited everyone. As a result, any acts of rebellion were quelled using brute force. Nevertheless, enslaved Africans persisted in their attempts and continued to revolt against the whites.

Exposing children to all this information that is generally not a part of their educational curriculum can help them develop their African-American identity. It can also provide them with the necessary tools needed to make way for change.

Providing Mentorship to Black Youth

Schools should also offer mentorship programs for African-American students. Many of these students come from a low socio-economic background and do not have the resources they need to excel. Dr. Smarte has come across many students in her school that come from foster homes. They lack the guidance they need to figure out the path they want to take in life.

A study reviewing the need for mentorship for Black male youth also reveals the benefits of mentoring young Black individuals³. Some of the benefits discussed include improved academic outcomes, reduced health-risk behavior, improved mental health, and better social-emotional well-being. Individuals who receive mentorship can also cultivate better interpersonal relationships and have an improved understanding of their racial identity.

The study also reviewed the challenges faced by young Black boys in the United States, thereby emphasizing the need for mentorship. According to the study, many key institutions play a significant role in the hardships faced by Black youth. Black students in educational institutions face far too much disciplinary action. They are also recommended to seek special education.

The criminal justice system is also 18 times more likely to sentence Black adults than their white counterparts.

According to the National Black Child Development Institute, Black boys require a great deal of support. Due to the circumstances created by key institutions and the lack of opportunities that confront them, most Black boys prioritize survival over creating a fulfilling life. Their futures are uncertain, and so they stress upon doing what they can to survive. Black parents also consider their children to be vulnerable

³ Mentoring for Black Male Youth: A Systematic Review of the Research: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320406064_Mentoring_for_Black_Male_Youth_A_Systematic_Review_of_the_Research

and in need of protection, which can act as a barrier to their self-efficacy and autonomy and interfere with their personal growth. Moreover, teachers appear to have lower expectations of Black students. As mentioned earlier, they over-discipline them, which can force students to grow detached from academics. This, in turn, can have a significant impact on their future and prevent them from achieving academic and professional success later in life.

The study also reviewed research revealing that Black boys are considered less innocent and less human than their White counterparts. Moreover, the research showcased the dehumanizing views adopted by police officers toward Black boys. As a result of these views, police officers were more likely to use brute force on Black suspects. This was also directly related to whether the suspects attempted to resist arrest or were located in areas with a high crime rate.

Given these findings, it is apparent that Black youth are regularly denied opportunities to live up to their potential and achieve personal and professional success. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that providing mentors could help them overcome at least some of the challenges they face. It can aim to bolster their personal strengths, provide them with direction, and help foster better outcomes despite the environmental risks present. While it may not hold all the answers, it can work as an intervention to empower, promote, and engage Black youth and be used alongside other attempts that seek to address systemic discrimination and improve their life prospects.

Some of the most essential aspects that mentorship programs can focus on here include:

1. **Consider the mentees' race as an advantage:** If you are mentoring a young Black individual, it is necessary to utilize a strengths-based approach. For instance, you can refer to the cultural wealth of the Black community and consider it is an asset.
2. **Hire Black mentors:** In order to improve the effectiveness of such programs, it is essential to hire mentors belonging to the same race/ethnicity as the mentees. This can allow them to serve

as positive role models and have an authentic understanding of the challenges confronting the people who are a part of the program.

3. **Add culturally-relevant curriculum in the program:** Mentorship programs should also include culturally-relevant philosophies and approaches in the program. Some mentoring programs attempt to integrate the principles of umoja (unity) and kujichagulia (self-determination) into their curriculum. They also utilize African-centric world views to help mentees build their racial identity and understand their roots. If a mentorship program is attempting to focus on these aspects, they must hire or collaborate with individuals who have the knowledge and expertise required to impart these cultural values to the mentees.
4. **Provide mentees with a safe space:** All mentors and staff members must receive training on how to talk about and listen to racially sensitive issues that young Black individuals experience. All mentees must be able to talk about the social challenges they face on a daily basis and have an open dialogue that can help the participants express and process their emotions and receive guidance.

Dr. Smarte spoke about the importance of mentorship, as well and recounted her experience with young African-American students. In particular, she discussed mentoring a student with a host of emotional issues. According to Dr. Smarte, the boy would often accompany her between classes and assist her with her bags and other belongings. She would converse with him along the way and was unaware how the boy had come to look up to her as his mentor. Eventually, in the 7th grade, she officially received the boy as a mentee. He approached her and asked her if she would be willing to mentor him. Naturally, Dr. Smarte agreed immediately. She arranged after-school mentoring sessions with him and 2 other students. In the days that followed, the boy's teachers approached Dr. Smarte and asked her how she coached him because he had become highly responsive in class. According to Dr. Smarte, the boy likely benefited from one-on-one interactions and was able to improve his academic

performance accordingly. When he faced difficulties, Dr. Smarte instructed his teachers to share the problems he was facing and send him to her for further guidance. She also asked her assistant and her teacher's aide to take over her lessons if the boy came in seeking her help. Essentially, Dr. Smarte went out of her way to facilitate the boy and made sure she had the time to address his needs.

The primary takeaway here is that even day-to-day interactions between educators and other Black students can leave an impact. An organized effort in this regard is likely to have even more positive implications and can benefit Black youth.

According to Dr. Smarte, the public school system also shies away from looking deeper and addressing the needs of African-American students, especially boys. In this particular case, the boy had been in need of special education as per his mother and his psychologist. However, the school was unable to provide him with these resources and suggested that he could cope in a normal learning environment like the rest of his peers. Dr. Smarte spent half of the school year mentoring him and helped him graduate middle school. His grades improved to such an extent that he was able to enroll in a prestigious prep school. He continued to do well and was able to achieve professional success.

As Dr. Smarte recounted the story, she posed an important question to all educators out there – ***why won't you go the extra mile to save a child's life?***

If a child appears to be struggling with something and is not as confident and self-assured to tackle them on their own, then it falls upon their teachers and mentors to guide them to better and show them how to cope and eventually thrive. Each of us has to do our part in developing a life, and even the smallest of efforts can go a long way in making that happen. Providing the right guidance at this point can result in a monumental shift in a child's life. They are incredibly young and impressionable, and teachers are willing to make more of an effort to guide them at this point then it can have a significant impact.

According to Dr. Smarte, if she was struggling with the same things at their age, she may not have had

the strength or courage to turn her life around – at least not without the right people guiding and mentoring her. She heavily recommends parents to look for teachers who go beyond the general care of a child and are willing to something more to assist the child. Here, Dr. Smarte also points out that teachers do not have to resort to any extraordinary measures to uplift a child. Instead, even if you are an ordinary person, you can do small things in an extraordinary way to make a difference in a child's life.

Chapter 3

Utilizing Historical Figures to Educate and Inspire

According to Dr. Miles, it is essential to use Black literature and revisit the stories of Black historical figures for guiding young Black people. Besides serving as a point of reference, these resources can serve to educate and inspire Black youth in a way that the current curriculum cannot. We have already discussed the need to integrate these resources within the current education system, as well as mentorship programs.

Now, let's take a look at how we can use the history of historical personalities to encourage and challenge the Black Youth.

5 Historical Figures That Can Challenge Young Black Students

When it comes to Black historical figures, you can always refer to some of the most prominent individuals that helped shape Black history and fought for their rights. For instance, Sir Martin Luther King Jr. is easily one of the most well-known and influential Black historical figures. However, if you are interested in branching out and focusing on some of the lesser-known Black historical figures, then we suggest you consider the following:

Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander

Sadie Alexander was a Black writer and the first Black woman to be awarded a PhD in economics in the USA. She also went on to be the first Black woman who graduated from Penn Law School and practiced law in Pennsylvania.

Alexander was also part of President Harry S. Truman's administration. She was a member of the Committee on Civil Rights in 1946 and also founded the National Bar Association in 1943. The association mainly consisted of Black attorneys, with Alexander serving as the national secretary.

Richard Allen

Richard Allen was an American clergyman and the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Church was the first independent black denomination in the US. He was born to slave parents, and the family was sold to a farmer in Delaware. Allen became a Methodist convert when he was 17 years old. When he turned 22, he was also allowed to preach. Eventually, he came to be considered as a talented candidate for the Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore.

Allen was able to buy his freedom in 1786 and went to Philadelphia to join St. George's Church. He was also an educator and a writer who made a significant difference in the community by sharing his experiences and guiding other members of the African-American community. In 1787, he converted an old blacksmith shop to establish the first church for African-Americans in the US.

Maya Angelou

Who doesn't know Maya Angelou? A poet, civil rights activist, and an award-winning author, Maya Angelou is best known for her memoir "I Know Why Caged Birds Sing." It was the first non-fiction bestseller written by an African-American woman.

Angelou experienced a great deal of discrimination and racial prejudices in Arkansas. She is the recipient of several honors, including 2 NAACP Image awards, where she won in the outstanding literary work category. She has written several books of poetry, 3 books of essays, and 7 autobiographies. Angelou is also credited with several television shows, movies, and plays. Her work is widely acclaimed as a celebration of black culture.

Kobe Bryant

Kobe Bryant was the son of Joe Bryant, a former NBA player. He was drafted at the age of 17 when he graduated high school and joined the Charlotte Hornets. He was later traded to another team, the Los Angeles Lakers. Bryant was voted to be a starter in the 1998 All-Star Game. He was only 19 at the time and became the youngest All-Star in NBA. He also won 5 titles as a marquee player for the Lakers.

Bryant was a member of the US men's basketball teams at the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 and the London Olympic Games in 2012. The teams won gold medals. Besides his career as an NBA star, Bryant was also a humanitarian who advocated for the homeless. He started the Kobe and Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation with his wife. The organization focused on reducing the number of homeless people in Los Angeles.

Arthur Ashe

Arthur Ashe was the only African-American man to win the singles title at the US Open, Wimbledon, and the Australia Open. He was also the first black player to be selected for the United States Davis Cup team. He helped the team win the Davis Cup challenge round in 1968, 1969, and 1970. He was ranked number one in world tennis after winning at Wimbledon and the World Championship.

Ashe had a hereditary heart condition. He was diagnosed with HIV in 1992. It was believed that he contracted HIV from the blood transfusions given to him during a heart surgery. Ashe went on to found the Arthur Ashe Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS. The organization worked to increase awareness about AIDS and advocated for safe sex education.

Ashe died in 1993. He posthumously received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Bill Clinton.

What Can We Learn?

Learning about the struggles and achievements of Black individuals can help offer a unique perspective to Black students. It can provide them an opportunity to feel inspired and explore new possibilities and opportunities. For example, if a Black student is particularly passionate about basketball, then Kobe Bryant can serve as a huge inspiration. Similarly, if someone is interested in writing, then they can explore the work of Black authors like Maya Angelou and James Baldwin and read other pieces of Black literature.

Learning about these historical figures also teaches students about the effects of racism and how even the most prominent Black individuals experienced discrimination at some point or other. Learning how these people were able to overcome these obstacles can also inspire Black students to pursue their dreams and not give in to societal pressure that is determined to view them in a certain way. Besides this, learning about Black achievements can also help Black students feel more validated.

Chapter 4

Hiring More Diverse Teachers to Impart Culturally-sensitive Education

If we want to improve educational outcomes for students, we need to train teachers to make more effort with Black students.

In 2020, multiple petitions were filed to support the creation of an anti-racist education system. One petition written by an alumni member of Xavier College Preparatory in Phoenix, AZ, focused on reviewing and advancing the goals and objectives of the district's educational curriculum to focus more on diversity, social justice, equity, and inclusion.

Teachers also need anti-racist teaching. According to Travis Bristol, anti-racist teaching refers to disrupting the current education system that focuses on white people and whiteness and focusing on a more inclusive way of teaching and learning⁴. Mr. Bristol is an assistant professor of education at the University of California.

One way to do this is by hiring more Black teachers. It is important to understand here that neither the student body nor teachers live in a vacuum. A student doesn't live in the school. Instead, they are part of a community. Anything that impacts this community is likely to hurt them too. What Black students need is access to teachers who are part of the same community, thereby being aware of the unique struggles they face. There is plenty of empirical evidence that supports the benefits of hiring Black teachers too. Let's take a look at a closer look at this.

⁴ Effective Anti-Racist Education Requires More Diverse Teachers, More Training:
<https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/07/08/889112818/what-it-would-take-to-get-an-effective-anti-racist-education>

The Benefits of Hiring Black Teachers

According to a 2018 study on the Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers, having a Black teacher can significantly improve educational outcomes for a Black student⁵. Black students who had at least one Black teacher by the 3rd grade were 13% more likely to go to college. Students who had 2 black teachers were 32% more likely to get a college education.

This study supports Dr. Smarte's earlier example of mentoring a Black student and helping him achieve success in their professional life. According to the study, having Black teachers produces a role model effect. It provides students with an ambition to achieve something in their academic life. Children having at least one Black teacher in Kindergarten and the first, second, and third grades are also 10% more likely to be described as students who are:

- Persistent
- Willing to making an effort
- Determined to finish difficult tasks

Other studies support these findings and depict the long-term impact of having teachers that belong to the same race. One study conducted by the IZA Institute of Labor Economics showed that students who had a single Black teacher in elementary school were more likely to graduate high school⁶. In particular, the presence of a Black teacher could reduce the chances of dropping out by 40% for Black boys belonging to low-income families.

There are also studies that show Black students with access to Black teachers are more likely to score higher on their year-end tests.

⁵ The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25254>

⁶ With Just One Black Teacher, Black Students More Likely to Graduate: <https://releases.jhu.edu/2017/04/05/with-just-one-black-teacher-black-students-more-likely-to-graduate/>

The Challenges of Hiring Black Teachers

Hiring Black teachers can have a monumental impact on the US education system. However, these teachers are also confronted with a number of challenges that can prevent them from doing their job properly.

As Mr. Bristol points out, these teachers are given the responsibility to undo 400 years of subjugation of oppression. Many school districts tend to hire these teachers in the most challenging schools and do not provide them with the necessary resources they need to address the problems at hand. As a result of these challenges, many Black teachers are forced to quit their jobs and look for better opportunities.

There are other challenges that confront Black teachers and prevent them from helping students live up to their greatest potential. These include:

Being Excluded from Conversations

As per one account, Black teachers are often excluded from conversations about the school culture⁷. Schools also do not consult Black teachers regarding decisions that would go directly impact their students. It also appears that schools do not seek the opinion of Black teachers in understanding what students of color need in order to succeed. Involving Black teachers in these conversations is vital for bringing about large-scale changes that address the problems faced by Black students in school. It can allow schools to tap into a valuable resource and understand issues at grassroots levels, and plan to resolve them accordingly.

Racial Bias in Testing

A teacher in Pennsylvania reported taking the PRAXIS test five times in order to be certified as a teacher. This test is among the various certifications available for Americans who want to pursue a career in

⁷ I Know What the Challenges Are For Black Teachers and How to Fix Them: <https://educationpost.org/i-know-what-the-challenges-are-for-black-teachers-and-how-to-start-fixing-them/>

teaching. Most white teachers only need to take this test once, and it has been accused of propagating racial bias. A study examined the experiences of Black and Latino undergraduates who gave the PRAXIS test⁸. It identified the test as an inequitable admission tool that did not provide equal opportunities to candidates of different races.

Limiting Black Teachers to Black Students

Another prominent issue that confronts Black teachers is that these teachers are normally only assigned to Black students. This can limit their usefulness, and they are unable to help white students broaden their perspectives and learn about Black culture. Moreover, assigning these teachers to Black students brings up other important questions, such as:

- Does assigning only Black teachers to Black students indicate that the school somehow feels Black students deserve less than their white counterparts?
- Does assigning Black teachers to Black students suggest that the school views these teachers as less qualified?
- Do white teachers only offer a limited amount of support to Black students and are not willing to go all the way to help them?

Considering Black Teachers as Disciplinarians

Racial stereotypes suggest that Black people are aggressive individuals⁹. As a result of these stereotypes, many schools consider Black teachers to be more suitable as disciplinarians instead of educators. Schools assume that these teachers are better at being strict and tough with their students simply because they have a no-nonsense vibe. They do not consider that these teachers will be able to connect

⁸ Will I Ever Teach? Latino and African American Students' Perspectives on PRAXIS I: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4121768?seq=1>

⁹ The Burden of Being a Black Teacher: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/11/the-challenge-of-teaching-while-black/506672/>

with students just as well as their white counterparts. Consequently, they do not provide Black teachers with the opportunity to establish a classroom environment that would be conducive to the learning process.

Given these challenges, it is more essential than ever to re-evaluate the systemic racism that exists in schools and how it inhibits Black teachers and students alike from progressing in academia. Many of these problems may appear inconsequential at the onset, but they have a lasting impact on students and teachers. Students are unable to get the help they need to make the most of their personal strengths and overcome weaknesses to graduate successfully. The lack of support offered to teachers also discourages them from pursuing a career in academia, and they may be forced to quit their jobs to look for other, more rewarding opportunities.

Chapter 5

Offering Validation and Guiding Students Toward Success

Besides large infrastructural changes dealing with hiring more Black teachers and offering mentorship programs to Black students, there are some small-scale changes that deliver a lasting impact too.

According to Dr. Miles, schools do not pay sufficient attention to their reward systems and fail to acknowledge Black students adequately. He discusses the importance of making these students feel validated to help them thrive in a learning environment.

As Dr. Miles aptly points out, every individual in the world is looking for love and appreciation. This doesn't necessarily need to come from friends and family. It can also come from the teachers that engage with students on a daily basis and play a highly significant role in determining their self-worth. Dr. Miles also recounted an incident where a small display of kindness to a Black student caused the girl to cry and admit that she has never been told that she is valuable.

This is a common problem faced by multiple Black students (male and female). They don't feel valued or validated, and as a result, they are less likely to strive for higher aspirations and improve their academic performance. To address this problem, teachers must regularly engage with students, evaluate their efforts, and offer words of support and advice that can help them improve. Often, even a single person believing in a Black student can make an immense difference to their life. We have already demonstrated these effects in earlier chapters. Even if schools do not have the resources to offer a full-scale mentorship program, they can train and guide their teachers to provide Black students with the support and encouragement they require to make them feel validated and 'seen.'

According to Dr. Miles, teachers can also teach students about Black heritage and discuss important historical figures to help Black students discover their hidden potential. Learning about these figures can remind Black students what they are capable of achieving and encourage them to pursue their dreams.

Encouraging Students and Helping Them Achieve Their Goals

Dr. Miles poses another important question: What if the child doesn't have a dream? In his opinion, this is not a normal occurrence. Every person dreams of something or the other. So, if you ask a student what their dream is and who they want to be when they grow up, they should have an answer. If they don't, then teachers can consider this as a red flag. In this scenario, it is up to the teacher to learn about the underlying factors that hinder the child and inhibit their ability to form a goal or a dream.

The teacher must then guide the child and offer the necessary encouragement they need to explore the things they are interested in and establish some life goals. Teachers can also serve as role models to their students or help them identify a potential individual who inspires them.

To do this successfully, teachers also need the necessary training and guidance to be able to identify potential problem areas and devise a solution that helps students. For instance, if a child is not performing as expected, it is imperative that teachers do not write off their behavior as an unnecessary act of rebellion. Instead, they should evaluate the child's performance and determine the source of the problem. Once they have this information, they can develop a plan of action to resolve it and guide the child to achieve better outcomes.

According to the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, there are three things that teachers can focus on to help develop motivation and a desire for academic achievements in students¹⁰. These include:

¹⁰ How to Help Kids Find their Aspirations: <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/31728/how-to-help-kids-find-their-aspirations>

Self-worth

As discussed earlier, it is very important for students to know that their presence matters and that someone cares about them. Teachers need to help students feel like they belong and add to their self-worth. This can be as simple as following up with a student who failed to attend class on a given day. If students feel that their absence was noted and their teachers are invested in their well-being, they are more likely to attend all classes and be more regular at school.

Engagement

Besides acknowledging a student's presence, teachers must also work to make sure Black students are paying attention in class. Keeping these students engaged can help them stay on track and remain focused on their goals. It can also inspire creativity and curiosity in them and encourage them to take risks. This is vital for achieving goals and dreams that seem out of reach for Black students.

Purpose

If teachers want to help Black students, they must also entrust them with some sort of responsibility and encourage them to be part of the school's community. This can lend them a sense of purpose and make them care about school and the impact of their actions on other students and members of the fraternity.

According to a survey carried out by Quaglia Institute, instilling a sense of purpose in students and having expectations can have a highly positive impact. Unfortunately, most teachers expect very little of their students. As per the results of the survey, 94 percent of students believe they are capable of achieving success. In comparison, only 74 percent of teachers share that optimism. The survey did not focus exclusively on Black students. However, given our previous findings, we can infer that the percentage of teachers who expect Black students to be successful is significantly lower.

This lack of expectation can be highly damaging to a student's morale and discourage them from improving their academic performance to achieve professional success. Schools must train their teachers to reform their way of thinking and ensure that they are able to inspire their students and build a culture of success.

Parting Words

So far, we have discussed the prevalent racial discrimination across different systems and institutions of the United States. We have examined the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 virus on Black communities and how it has created joblessness, disrupted family relationships, and impacted the Black youth as they attempt to adapt to at-home learning. We have also discussed the economic impact of the pandemic on Black families.

Besides, this we have assessed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational learning. With insights drawn from Dr. Miles and Dr, Smarte, we have discussed the need to initiate change in the American Educational System to help empower Black Youth. There are several ways to do this.

For starters, schools need to develop a comprehensive plan for teaching Black history to the youth. Instead of limiting our learning to Black history month, it is important to integrate Black history, literature, and achievements as part of the school curriculum. Schools must also discuss Black historical figures and their individual achievements and contributions toward the advancement of Black communities in the USA.

Besides this, Dr. Smarte also highlighted the need to introduce mentorship programs for Black students. Empirical evidence suggests that these programs can motivate, engage, and inspire Black students and allow them to score higher on tests, graduate high school, and pursue a college education.

To encourage this, schools need to hire Black teachers and mentors who can understand the problems and obstacles that prevent Black students from achieving academic success at the same level as their white counterparts. These teachers and mentors can take on a racially sensitive approach toward helping these students and understand and relate to their struggles. They can also recount their own stories and how they were able to overcome the problems they faced when they were younger.

By providing Black students with suitable allies and a support system, schools can help them thrive and explore their untapped potential.

We have also discussed the current challenges that exist in hiring Black teachers and how these individuals are excluded from conversations related to their students and limited to the role of a disciplinarian over an educator. Schools must recognize how they are doing a disservice to these teachers and address the racial bias that influences them.

Finally, we have also talked about the need to make small-scale changes in the form of offering more validation to students by appreciating them and encouraging them to achieve their goals. Black students tend to have a very bleak outlook with respect to their future. Schools must tackle this problem by reminding students of their self-worth and engage them by providing them with a sense of purpose and responsibility.

It is also important to remember that we are all made in the image of God. Even if the system does not work in our favor right now, we are all loved equally by the Almighty. Therefore, we must keep striving and facing these challenges head-on to create a better world for ourselves and for the ones that come after us.

As members of the Black community, we must do what is necessary to change the world around us and fight for our rights to create a true democracy that respects people of all races, religions, and ethnicities. Successfully doing so can present new opportunities to the Black youth and allow us to make essential changes to the system and eliminate racism.