

Article

# Being about It: Engaging Liberatory Educational Praxis

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**Abstract:** Engaging in liberatory praxis at times means operating outside of set or limiting boundaries. As such, this article is written in the first person to highlight both a praxis of freedom (outside of the status quo) and to show impact. It pays homage to elder educators in the process of (re)membering those who have paved the way for liberatory praxis and influence my personal educational philosophy presented here for guidance. Student voices are amplified in the process of highlighting ways that (re)searching, (re)visioning, (re)cognizing, (re)presenting, and (re)claiming are actualized to engender educational freedom across curricular content in a higher educational setting.

**Keywords:** liberatory education; educational praxis; education for freedom; master teaching; amplifying student voices; trauma informed teaching

## 1. Introduction

*“Teaching and the shaping of character is one of our great strengths. In our worldview, our children are seen as divine gifts of our creator. Our children, their families, and the social and physical environment must be nurtured together.”*

—Asa G. Hilliard, III

*“What is a teacher? I’ll tell you: it isn’t someone who teaches something, but someone who inspires the student to give of her best in order to discover what she already knows.”*

—Paulo Coelho

*“A gifted teacher is not only prepared to meet the needs of today’s child, but is also prepared to foresee the hopes and dreams in every child’s future.”*

—Robert John Meehan

Liberatory Education has been defined as an approach to learning that provides students with agency, acknowledges student realities and experiences, and also acknowledges oppressive policies and societal structures that may hinder their progression [1,2]. Engaging in liberatory educational praxis at times means operating outside of set or possibly limiting boundaries of what is considered to be academically astute. This leads to questions of who is creating the definitions and boundaries and whether they are equitable for all participants. It also involves the inclusion of student voices as central and valid in the process of discovery and learning. When engaged appropriately and critically with particular care [3], the inclusion of all voices does not mean the eclipsing of some voices belonging to those who might see things differently. The building of community that is included in the process makes room for all perspectives and the ability to sift through tension to grow from perceived conflict.

As such, this article diverges from conventional expectations of academic writing that require formal, abstract, rigid, conventional, and personally detached third-person language establishing an authoritative stance [4]. It is purposefully written in the first person to highlight both a praxis of freedom (stepping outside of boundaries as discussed above) and to exemplify both the process and the impact of fully engaging and modeling liberatory praxis. Doing what we speak of; being about it. This is my attempt to fully capture the spirit and feeling of what I am clear is MY work [5]. It will directly



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demonstrate that the work begins with self (internal work within the teacher) and then moves/spreads outwards (to and through the students who both bloom from it and come to reflect it). Information is still presented in a logical format and flow; however, the composition and content are unconventional as the scheme highlights the author's intentions and thought process and also presents information from the perspective of students who speak truth to their personal experiences with this form of praxis [2,3].

Switching gears and taking a step back in the process, if I were speaking live to a physical audience, I would begin by first asking permission from my elders to speak. This act pays homage to the work that has been done by my progenitors and seeks their approval to continue their work and to speak on it with any form of authority [5–7]. It is an acknowledgement of the source; those who came before and did the work to create the space for my words to be received. It recognizes both the sacrifices and expertise of general predecessors in the field and specifically gives credit to the actual teachers who taught me. (Re)membering their contributions is also an act of resistance ensuring that their work and legacy is not erased or diminished [5]. Cynthia Dillard [5] explains that the parentheses surrounding the letters R and E serve as a reminder and recognition of the brilliance and presence that African people have always had and have always known existed. It is a revolutionary and pointed wake up call to the rest of the world to meet us at our understanding.

As this piece is written, I will give honor to my elders by calling the names of the teachers who directly paved my path. I lift the names of the ones who raised me as a person of integrity, a scholar, and an educator teaching me how to educate for sovereignty and liberation. I do this to fully model the process I am attempting to describe, and to bring the article full circle as I begin and end on this path starting from being a student of their teachings and (re)lecting back to modeling their lessons and presenting my personal tailored instructional consuetude through the words and (re)membrances of my students. The hope is that this can be used for a guide for educators of various backgrounds across multiple contexts to enhance and deepen their teaching approach.

I call the names of the ones who saved my life and made space for me in high school: Barbara Gilmore, Lori Grace, Robert Browning, and Scott Halverson. I would not be here were it not for them. I grew up in Long Beach, California during a time when Los Angeles was the murder capital of the world. My neighborhood was dangerous, my home life was difficult, and my views of my value and future potential were skewed. I did not think that I mattered. Most of my teachers did not think I did either; at least this is what their silences, their words, and their actions communicated. They reinforced that farce both directly and indirectly. Conversely, the teachers named above saw me, created space for me, believed in me, and provided a safe place for me to get away from the chaos around and within me. Lori Grace and Robert Browning gave me a buffer and an artistic outlet through theater. Barbara Gilmore saw what I needed and became a mother to me as she provided me an outlet through movement: cheerleading and choreography. They taught me that I could do anything and made me believe it when I did not. They made it safe for me to exist, dream, and strive toward more.

I call the names of those who guided me through the process of healing from my past, finding myself and my voice, testing my voice, and establishing myself as one who would positively touch the lives of others in the role of teacher: Nana Cheryl Tawede Grills, Nana Abass, Nana Afua Tabiri (Nana Baa), Baba Ifayemi Elebuibon, Mama Marimba Ani, Papa Jean Pierre Paulin Marseille, Baba Wade Nobles, Iya Mudiwa Mbele, Mama Afia Nson Bonsu, Mama Makini Niliwaambi, Baba Asa G. Hilliard, III, Baba Thomas Parham (Dr. P), Baba Kobe Kambon, Baba Wade G. Nobles, Baba Na'im Akbar, Mama Aku Kadogo, Dr. Leon D. Caldwell, Dr. Myra Burnett, Dr. Arletha Williams-Lizana, Dr. Veta Goler, and Dr. Aditi Pai. These are the names of my forever teachers who first introduced me to liberatory education. They modeled for me how I should show up in the world for others simply through the act of being themselves; both exalted and approachable.

Through readings, formalized lessons, informal conversations, and consistent observation (at times when they did not realize I was watching) I learned. I learned about the world around me, about my history, how to think critically and critically analyze content/information, how to actively listen, how to see myself, how to take perspective, how to engage with others, how to conduct myself, how to respond (or not to), how to leave the world better than I found it. Some of these names you will find on publications and in professional settings, some you will not; and all are valid and important. It was through these guides that I learned the acts of (re)searching and engaging African history through multiple sources [5,8], (re)membering who we are, all we have done, and all we are capable of [8,9], (re)visioning educational praxis to create spaces of liberation and freedom [1,8,10,11], (re)cognizing where we have been, where we are now, and where we must be [6,9,12], (re)presenting African and women's (often hidden) historical perspectives [5], and (re)claiming identity and excellence [5,6,10,12]. I learned how to apply all of this in both scholarship and praxis, and they held me accountable to do so.

I felt their enthusiasm as they engaged in scholarship and bathed in the light they cast as they urged me to never sit in anyone else's shadow. They taught me so many things, but it was never really about what they taught (the topic or subject), but how they approached the process of teaching. Their depth of knowledge, their passion, their support, their willingness to learn from (young, inexperienced, still learning) me, their dispositions as they taught, and the way they lived their teachings. They modeled by being who they said they were and who they were asking me to be (the essence of being about it). They modeled through authenticity and consistency. They modeled by allowing me to be me, while gently nudging, teaching, and reminding me to become the best version of myself.

I grew to meet their expectations first, then to meet my own as they taught me that what really mattered was the bar I set for myself, what I believed about what I could accomplish, and the language I used in the process. I found my own bar and I continue to raise it as I grow in the understanding of myself and learn from my students. This was my first introduction and foray into liberatory educational praxis. I still sit at their feet to learn and also sit next to them to work. Now I model what I have absorbed for others as they did for me [8]. You will also see much of what I have said about them as well as the tenets of liberatory praxis reflected in my personal philosophy statement.

I must also reiterate that I have had many teachers that have unfortunately taught me the exact opposite of these lessons. I have encountered people who did not care that I was in the room, who did not seek to know nor connect with me, who even said harmful things in the process of "teaching" me. They said things that felt like personal and cultural attacks communicating a different kind of lesson separate from the curriculum. They did not like me personally or people who are phenotypically similar to me. I was still expected and required to show them respect when it was beyond clear that they had none for me. They mishandled their responsibility to shape young lives. Whether these things were on purpose or through general ignorance, I could not tell the difference. Intentionality does not matter. Their actions still stung and left an enduring mark.

At times it can be easier to remember the painful lessons than it is to remember the positive and the optimal because of the scars left behind [11]. Light has a softer touch and leaves a different mark. This is why I do this work and engage in this praxis. I will not speak their names here though for two reasons: 1. I do not seek to exalt or reflect their actions, behaviors, or legacy, and 2. I offer them the protection they did not extend to me. Even in this act I am being who my forever teachers have taught me to be. I am retaining my integrity and extending grace, and being solution focused. This article is about radiating that light.

## 2. Liberatory Educational Praxis

This work begins with the understanding that I am a teacher always and in all ways. It was not always my plan; however, teaching opportunities kept finding me when I was not looking for them. I originally planned to be a Hollywood star, drama major, and all

of that, but that is a story for another time. My masters and doctorate degree journeys took me down different paths that kept returning me to the classroom teaching at different institutions (PWI and HBCU) where I engaged liberatory praxis wherever I was (of course, not to the more in-depth and integrated level I am now). As Dillard [5] discusses, I was in search of more lucrative professional options when I was called to the classroom again by someone who was familiar with my work. This is how I found myself teaching at the number one HBCU (for sixteen consecutive years): Spelman College.

Though it was not my initial choice to go down this path, I have, however, always loved teaching and understood my responsibility from the beginning of my teaching career. Because of my models (forever teachers) and because of my personal experiences sitting in the place and space of a learner in low socioeconomic schools in so-called inner city spaces, I knew that how I showed up mattered. I also knew that students' experiences with their teachers remain with them [11]. With this understanding, I have actively chosen to leave my students with light.

I came to realize that the responsibility also does not begin and end in the classroom within the specified class time. Whether I am engaged in a formal classroom exchange, mentoring, mothering, on social media, or just "doing me", my actions, words, and demeanor are always teaching a lesson to whomever may be paying attention; and students are always paying attention. This may seem like common sense, but I learned this sitting at the feet of Baba Asa G. Hilliard, III. Through his direct words and his informal actions, he taught me that a master teacher [the African teacher] is "a parent, friend, guide, coach, healer, counselor, model, storyteller, entertainer, artist, architect, builder, minister, and advocate to and for students" [10]. A teacher is one who works to ensure that education is not subjugating for students. Subjugating education focuses on one perspective and ignores the histories, perspectives, and realities of all others [11]. S(he) is one who works to ensure that students have fun while learning, that they learn the truth, are considered, seen, appropriately challenged, protected, allowed to experiment, and allowed to make mistakes, and that they experience growth. By doing so, s(he) creates a space for liberatory educational praxis where students can actively participate in their own process. S(he) is about the work and (re)members to place students at the center.

According to Freire [1], liberatory education facilitates an understanding of social systems of oppressions for students and equips them with an understanding of how to challenge and change those systems. Students are guided through the process of (re)cognizing and understand how American education has been historically structured for one demographic and employed as a tool of oppression. One way this is achieved is through problem-posing education that employs dialogue to (re)vision education and builds critical consciousness, stimulates critical thinking, connects to reality, engenders creativity, and nurtures reflection and action [5]. It transforms and allows students to (re)claim the educational experience. Once this is understood, whether education is subjugating or freeing is up to the teacher who must embody the lessons taught about curricular freedom.

Teachers literally shape the future both by what they teach and by how they teach. The content and the quality are both salient ingredients to the equation. A big part of this is how we (re)present and interact with students [11] because how we choose to show up and engage is a choice. At times we forget that college students are not yet full-fledged adults, but what I like to call advanced adolescents who still need guidance and nurturing as they are still learning how to independently engage with the world without the direct supervision of parents or guardians. Freire [13] reminds us that teachers should not solely be seen as nurturers nor just as strict purveyors of information, but we need to strike a balance between the two because our students need love in the process of learning. Relationships are vital to the learning interaction, and I would argue that it is the very foundation of liberatory educational praxis.

We create spaces of freedom when we get to know our students, create relationships, and allow them to grow in the process of learning. Teaching is a dynamic process that should develop the mind, heart, character, and behavior of students. It should simultane-

ously tap their genius and touch their spirit as teachers (re)cognize the divinity and full humanity of children/students who are (or should be) regarded as blessings and revered as our future [10,11,14]. A teacher must (re)search and learn to speak the individualized language of each student. In other words, learn their cultural background, learning history, strengths, preferences, challenges, needs, etc. Once we know students then we can begin to build trust and engage on a deeper level. This, in my view, is educational freedom. This is the apex of learners' understanding of how to create and transform rather than simply regurgitate and mimic a template as they trust to engage deeper.

When we remember how we liberate, we seek to engage in intentional educational practice. We (re)search, (re)vision, (re)cognize, (re)present, (re)claim, (re)member [5]. We are clear about what we are teaching and why we are teaching, and work to teach it in a manner that touches the spirit and both reflects the professor's passion and ignites passion in students [11]. From the teachings of Ptahhotep (2350 B.C.E.) as shared through Hilliard, Williams, and Damali [15]:

*The Seba (wise person/master teacher feeds the Ka (soul) with what endures . . . the wise is known by his or her good actions. The heart of the wise matches his or her tongue and his or her lips are straight when he or she speaks. The wise have eyes that are made to see and ears that are made to hear what will profit the offspring.*

In other words, they approach education authentically and are accountable in the process. Freire [1] adds that the teacher asks themselves, and are clear, about whom and on whose behalf they are working. In this view and in the words of Dillard [5], I am clear about who I am working for, and I am fulfilling my covenant to the ancestors by tapping into their knowledge and sharing it with the next generation. I am working from a place of passion. As an Educational Psychologist, I have a deep level understanding of what happens within the brain as we are presented with new information. I understand how the past (positive and negative messages and experiences) and present (functioning and environment) interact to set the stage for how we encode information. I apply that understanding to module development, course creation, student interactions, and everyday teaching as I engage in trauma-informed practice.

Trauma-informed practice focuses on considering and being responsive to students who have experienced trauma [16]. Teachers who engage this form of praxis adapt an interlaced socioemotional approach that focuses on establishing relationships with students, avoiding triggers, employing tailored de-escalation when students are triggered, creating physical, psychological, and emotional safe spaces, and providing students with choice, voice, and empowerment. The goal is to enhance the educational process for students, at times providing them with positive experiences that they have not previously had.

I am intentional in creating course experiences for students towards a praxis of freedom. As I one day aspire to be counted among the lineage of master teachers, I share my educational philosophy in the next section with these words regarding authenticity in mind. I then share the feedback of students across years and content in the following section to see if my philosophy matches with their reality (not just mine). I sincerely hope that, in the spirit of the elders named and the teaching of Ptahhotep shared above [15], that what I say (or think) I do connects to the sentiments and actual experiences of my students.

### 3. My Teaching Philosophy

My overall goal as an instructor is to have a lasting impact on my students; one that surpasses the semester exams; one that they not only faintly remember but hold onto and employ. I pray that, one day, I have the same impact on my students that my teachers (those names that I have called) have had on me. I seek to enhance the overall educational environment for both colleagues and students. I believe in developing relationships with students and creating an overall course experience by creating community amongst them, teaching content, fostering growth, making information meaningful, and instructing them to think both critically and globally beyond course information through the presentation of multiple perspectives. I encourage students to actively participate in their learning by

conducting further research rather than blindly taking in the information I am giving to them at face value. This is a vital component to liberatory educational praxis [1]. It is important that students take information to the next level on their own.

I feel it is important to be culturally responsive to meet the diverse needs of all students (kindergarten through college, traditional and nontraditional students) from different backgrounds, as all course environments are diverse, even those that appear to be phenotypically similar. The picture of the virtual classroom I created during the COVID-19 quarantine is an example of how I show that all students are welcome (Figure 1). Teachers who are culturally responsive get to know their students, work to understand their cultural backgrounds, and find ways to incorporate their cultural and lived perspectives and experiences with course content [17]. They focus on student learning (as opposed to grade-focused achievement), cultural integration, social justice, and indigenous language revitalization. This is salient because research shows that how students encode, think, and process information is connected to cultural nuance, transmission, and preference [11,17,18]; and these needs do not end at the culmination of high school.



**Figure 1.** Virtual Classroom created for online instruction during the COVID-19 quarantine.

Regardless of the age or level of the student I am working with, I assist them in (re)cognizing, (re)visioning, and considering cultural differences in themselves and others, and guide them through the process of challenging their own biases and deeply held/limiting beliefs about their own abilities and about those of others [5]. My unique educational background affords me the ability to guide and debrief this process by creating a non-judgmental, safe, and brave space where students push past their comfort zones and engage in difficult dialogues without defensiveness. This assists in students considering themselves responsible global citizens who understand the importance of reflecting on their own practice so that they can present differently when they join the professional workforce. This is also where the possibilities for transformation and freedom, or (re)claiming, begin to take shape.

This begins on day one when students enter the classroom. In my personal practice, I take attendance by calling names aloud so that I connect them with faces and so I can hear their voices. I ask students to correct me if I mispronounce their name and ask them to tell me the meaning/stories behind their names. I ask them if there is something else they would like the class to call them. I ask that anyone who finds speaking out in class challenging let me know in private. I explain that we will all get to know each other, that they are not just bodies in seats, but important to the educational journey we are taking

during the semester. During COVID, while students were wearing masks, I took the process a step further by asking them to send me selfies introducing themselves so that I could see and know their faces.

I explain all expectations so they are clear about what to expect from me and the course. I explain that importance is not placed on the letter grade but what they learn and carry with them and how they engage the process. I explain that everyone in theory begins with an A; they keep it by attending class, reading, and coming to class prepared, by participating in discussions and experiential activities (which cannot be made up), by reading all instructions thoroughly and following rubrics to ensure all expectations are met, but also by being creative in how they complete assignments. I explain that although everything is laid out in the syllabus (which they should always consult and refer back to), I will also go over assignment expectations a month in advance so that they can ask questions and fully understand how to be successful and have ample time to complete assignments. I commit to giving them my all and ask that they meet me at the same level.

I see learning as a dynamic and constructive process entailing content and all the prior knowledge and experience students bring with them. In terms of constructivism (the intersection of human ideas, or intelligence, with real-world experiences), I have the research-based content; however, the process unfolds (the specific examples used, and the connections made) as we go based on who is in the classroom and their particular needs [19]. I invite students to develop a growth mindset, or the belief that intelligence can develop or be enhanced [20]. I also invite them to share their personal experiences to add to the lesson, teaching them again to be active participants in their learning process (owning the experience). Through this process, students learn, or (re)cognize, that they bring their own knowledge and value to the classroom. They are not passive repositories for information [1]. They also learn to critically engage with the material on their own through active reading and metacognitive (critically thinking about their thought and learning process) practice. They come to understand that once they adjust their thinking or engage in the process of (re)visioning [5], there are no limits to what they can come to understand and accomplish. Anything is literally possible [11].

I view accessibility as equitable education ensuring that ALL students are afforded the opportunity to receive everything they should from the course. This is another process of (re)presenting. This means offering content in multiple formats with closed captioning for videos, making sure materials are visually stimulating (colorful and balanced) and readable (rather than informationally overwhelming), and engaging with students in ways that make them feel connected to the course, the professor, and to each other. This means designing the course with engagement and representation, and diversifying ways students can creatively express their understanding of content.

I consider myself a teacher, a scholar, a growth facilitator, and a change agent. Vital to this identification is continued professional development and remaining current on educational research for innovation, engaging in best practices, adapting to the needs of various learners, and keeping course content updated and challenging [5,11]. It is salient to continue doing self-assessment and self-work and to remain solution-focused by consistently merging research and practice; doing the work rather than just talking about it. As Baba Asa Hilliard [10,21] explained, teachers should see teaching as “a calling, a constant journey towards mastery, a scientific ‘becoming a library’, a matter of care and custody for our culture and traditions, a matter of a critical viewing of the wider world, and a response to the imperative of MAAT”. The tenets of MAAT are truth, justice, righteousness, harmony, order, balance, and reciprocity.

This work is absolutely my calling. I am fully invested in my role and impact as a teacher. I like to find creative and experiential ways to help students form connections. I enjoy the process. I instill this in my students and teach them self-care in the process of balancing responsibilities and doing good work. John Henrik Clarke said, always “do your best work”. Thus, I understand there is not a point at which you arrive at the end, so I

attempt to continue to level up as a teacher. Teachers are learners and learners are teachers in a dynamic process.

It is important to note that the process is also not always sunshine and rainbows. I also express love through holding students accountable to their responsibilities and performance. They receive the grade they earn regardless of, or more accurately, because of, our relationship. They are held accountable to being their best selves and doing their best work. When they fall short of this expectation they deal with the consequences of those decisions. It is my understanding of this, my love of teaching, my commitment to research-based practice, and my continued development to grow and address areas of weakness, as well as my desire to inspire change and have a positive impact on students, that makes me an effective instructor and mentor and allows me to create liberatory educational spaces for all learners.

#### 4. A Note on Amplifying Student Voices

I can speak about myself all day, but as far as the reader is concerned it may or not be true. It could simply be word play and lip service to gain another publishing credit. I could also be writing about what I think I do, or what I aspire to be as a teacher without it actually translating to students in the ways I think it is or without it being effective. This conversation about my praxis is not truly authentic unless it comes directly from those who are impacted. I would not dare presume to speak for them without their input as they are the experts on their own experience [2,7]. This would be the antithesis of trauma-informed practice, of which powerlessness and thus voicelessness are signifying features [22].

Due to the way kindergarten through twelfth grade education in America has been traditionally structured, the classroom has historically been a space where students can feel like helpless participants in a predetermined process: a process where they have no input, and thus no voice; where outcomes do not matter. Trauma-informed practices seek to shift this by seeking student input and seeking to understand their perspectives. One of my goals as a professor is to be a positive force in the lives of my students. One way to do this through liberatory praxis is by amplifying their voices. I seek to support their growth and teach them that they all have important things to say that the world needs to hear. I work with students to come to trust their own voices while still remaining accountable to growth.

In an effort to be about the work and test whether my philosophy translates into reality, I decided to trust their voices too, and to employ them as a personal guide for growth. In anticipation of this publication, I put out a call to my students to request their feedback on my teaching style and their personal experiences taking a course with me. The call was answered by students who have taken my various courses (African Diaspora and the World [ADW], Child Psychology, Junior Research, Multicultural Education, Psychology of the Inner City Child) over the years, both past and present. I asked everyone the same exact open-ended question, specifically worded in order to allow them to answer in whatever way was authentic and true to their personal experience.

What was your experience with me as a teacher?

Each student who submitted a response also consented to having both their response and their name published in this article. In fact, they were informed that sending a response to me was confirmation that they were giving consent to have both their words and their names printed. Choice and voice are again the central point. They were asked to write whatever was veritable to their experience and I explained that I would print their exact response without alteration.

I present to you their ( $n = 10$ ; female = 9, male = 1) unfiltered responses (unedited) beginning with a certificate a student presented to me upon her graduation in 2015 (Figure 2). Student respondents ranged from first-year students to 8-year graduates reflecting back to their time as enrolled students and speaking on continued mentorship relationships. Of the four graduates, two are currently teaching, one is in curriculum development and educational policy, and one is studying to become a lawyer as she currently engages in

work focused on maternal health and reproductive justice. It is also important to note that each student respondent took at least two classes with me (7 = 2 classes; 3 = 3 classes), adding a bit more weight to their evaluations.

### 5. Student Responses

**Joanie Johnson (Child Psychology, Junior Research, Multicultural Education; Class of 2015):**



**Figure 2.** Student created certificate presented to me by the student at Spelman commencement in 2015.

**Kayla Brown (ADW 111 and 112; Class of 2025):** At Spelman College, I have the ability to select classes that fit not only my schedule but my future. During my freshman year, I was required to enroll in African Diaspora and the World. The African Diaspora and the World (ADW) Program is centered on the experiences of African-descended people. Through this program, students learn about themselves while discovering the missing pieces of American and World history that were not taught in high school. As a graduate of a predominately white high school, I felt a sense of urgency to enroll in this course despite it being a requirement. My first semester of this course was taught by another professor on campus. Due to conflicts, this class was mainly offered virtually until the very end of the fall semester. This made it much more difficult to remain engaged and motivated in the course. Once spring semester registration opened, I knew that I had to make a change.

During the summer prior to attending college, my older sister, an alum, urged me to enroll in Dr. Chateé Richardson’s section of the ADW course. Since I was unable to enroll in her section in the fall due to scheduling conflicts with other courses, I made the “executive” decision to ensure that I created a schedule that would accommodate her class. From the first day, though virtual due to COVID, I knew my decision was the right one.

Dr. Richardson's passion for not only African Diaspora and the World but for her students' growth radiated every minute of each class. Her vulnerability allowed us to be comfortable in our vulnerability and truly gain a sense of self. As incoming freshmen, this space was a necessity as we entered a whole new world. Her effective teaching method allowed us to understand that we come from a lineage of kings, queens, warriors, trailblazers, and ancestors who possessed pure audacity. Dr. Richardson's selflessness and open-mindedness allowed for amazing group discussions that would have us leave class with new perspectives, new joys, new motivation, new wisdom, new knowledge, and new bonds with our Spelman sisters.

The realization that her class would come to an end was a dreadful one. Dr. Richardson's approach to life and lesson created for each of us a true home away from home. It also gave meaning to the idea that the college is a family. After attending her class, I gained a mentor, second "mama" away from home, and a new sense of pride as a descendant of power.

**Noshari Harris (ADW 111 and 112; Class of 2025):** When entering Dr. Richardson's classroom, I felt a sense of a warm welcome and safe space. Her strong passion for the course's subject matter and, most definitely, for her students was evident to me. She treated us all as her own. Every student has a safe class they are more than comfortable in, and Dr. Richardson's was my safe class.

During a regular class, we discuss the first 5 to 10 min to debrief and discuss our day or week. Then we discuss the assigned texts and/or videos before arriving at the class, leading to a class discussion. Dr. Richardson's class consists primarily of discussions favorable to my peers and me. Speaking about how our understanding of the texts created various questions and opinions. Through her excitement and accurate knowledge of the course material, I enjoyed learning the course material; her effective teaching method allowed my peers and me to truly understand the generations who came before us and helped us be where we are today.

Dr. Richardson's class is one that I keep near and dear to my heart. Dr. Richardson and I remain in touch to this day, seeking assistance in my current classes and advice. In my capacity as a student, I am incredibly thankful for the opportunity to gain a mentor and a fantastic professor.

**Jada Holland (Child Psychology and Multicultural Education; Class of 2023):** Dr. Richardson is an amazing and unique professor. I have never experienced a class as exciting, immersive, and challenging as hers. Her teaching style is very special. She builds great bonds and relationships with her students and makes sure that we know that she cares about us. She brings in a great energy to class daily, and always has a positive attitude and very thought-provoking prompts to bring to the class. My experience in multicultural education was very great. It was definitely one of my favorite classes of my senior year and I am so happy I got the chance to experience it. Dr. Richardson's class is truly an immersive experience. She has lots of hands on and field activities included, which are very beneficial to education majors, as well as any other major, willing to question their own beliefs and biases, and become a better person. I am definitely a better educator and woman because of her, and I am very glad I took her course.

**Eyerusalem Masele (Multicultural Education, Child Psychology, Psychology of the Inner City Child; Class of 2020):** I have taken several classes with Dr. Richardson as my instructor. While each class covered different subjects in education studies, her teaching style remained consistent. My favorite class with Dr. Richardson was Psychology of the Inner City Child. Immediately the title of the class stood out to me and later became a very foundational experience in my teaching and education practice. Dr. Richardson's lectures included

PowerPoints with images, videos, and key points that tied into our assigned reading. Dr. Richardson's consistent use of multimedia content enhanced my learning retention and gave me a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of education practices, law and policy and psychology. What made her classes so unique was her ability to be vulnerable and draw from her own personal experiences as a mother, educator and Black woman. This allowed students to feel connected to their instructor while also reflecting on their own experiences.

I personally really appreciated when Dr. Richardson was willing to be a speaker for an educational symposium I put together my junior year at Spelman for students in our college community. She facilitated a lecture around the Psychology of the Inner City Child class and although the session was an hour long and not a semester, students reviewed that they appreciated the thoughtfulness, relatability and the layers that Dr. Richardson presents. As a student it meant a lot to me that she took my personal academic projects seriously and invested her time and energy to volunteer as a speaker.

**Zoe Shepard (ADW 111 and 112; Class of 2026):** Dr. Richardson is a dynamic teacher. Not only does she create unique assignments to teach the concepts students are meant to learn, but she does so in a way that makes them active participants in their learning. More than this, she masterfully incorporates different mediums into her lessons which not only helps to convey ideas and information, but it helps us to have a more expansive worldview. Classes are often a combination of looking through archival videos, watching films centered on the African experience, or examining different pieces of literature to learn about black people throughout the diaspora, their contributions, and the impact that their work has on our lives today. Through thorough class discussions and lectures, we as students learn to critically examine what we've known with what we're coming to know, and we get to do so in a genuinely safe space. Aside from academic feats, Dr. Richardson cares for the wellbeing of each and every one of her students in ways that inspire us to bring our whole selves and our whole perspectives with us when we enter the classroom. She doesn't just invite you to learn, she makes room for you.

**Delaiah Sneed (ADW 111 and 112; Class of 2026):** There is a sincere embedded level of honesty in Dr. Richardson's teaching. Her curiosity surpasses the desire to know the past as it affects the present but how we as students think and can connect the dots. Her teaching is conversational, mutual, it is a two-way street that is her job just as much as it is ours.

**Maya Thirkill (ADW 111 and 112; Class of 2020):** Dr. Richardson is an excellent professor. Her most profound lessons were in the discussions of literature and life rather than tests of memory. Her seminar teaching style encouraged students to discuss the origins of societies and cultures, which often challenged deep-held generational beliefs, without judgment. Students were asked to consider the social framing of every text when assigning its value and consider the aspects of each person's intersectional identity before meeting them with opposition. She cultivated a safe space that fostered authentic kinship between students, so that we viewed each other as partners in scholarship rather than competitors, being rewarded for impeccable regurgitation. This kinship extended beyond the classroom and continues into adulthood. Each student's worldview was expanded because they were able to exchange perspectives on sensitive topics with sonder, and this equips generations of Dr. Richardson's students with the confidence and cultural humility to continue expanding their worlds.

**Cori'Anna White (ADW 111 and 112; Class of 2026):** Dr. Chateé Richardson is extraordinary Professor. Prior to my arrival to college, my former teacher who was taught by Dr. Richardson over five years ago advised me to take her class.

In signing up for it, I was extremely nervous. Despite this, I am glad that I did. I can recall entering Dr. Richardson's classroom and being taught facts about black history that are seldom talked about in school. I learned that black history does not start with slavery, and although I was taught this prior to arriving to Spelman, I was taught it once again, from a different lens. We talked about race, gender, politics, geography, and so much more. In doing so, she granted us the platform to share personal experiences on discriminatory factors that we might have faced, to share things that we read or learned previously, and to ask questions. Her willingness to listen to us and respond to us are two traits that are seldom seen by professors. For her unique ability to do this, I thank her. Indeed, Professor Richardson is a great educator. She teaches her students so that they will comprehend the material and apply it to their own lives rather than temporarily remembering it for an exam. Her contribution has been so significant that my parents noticed a change in my appreciation for black culture, and it is because of her that my appreciation for it increased. Because of her stellar teaching habits and ability to connect with the students, I gladly recommend her.

**Darius Williams (Child Psychology, Multicultural Education, Junior Research; Class of 2015):** I remember every class I've ever taken—whether good or bad. They are why I decided to teach. But perhaps the most pivotal courses in my time as an Early Childhood Education major were the Child Psychology and Multicultural Education courses I took from Professor Chateé Richardson.

Spending my Wednesday evenings exploring the sociocultural theory, cognitive development, and psychosocial development would eventually become the highlight of my week. I vividly remember trekking to our Child Psychology course. I met the powerhouse I would come to know as Professor Richardson. She had a masterful way of building relationships that made us love coming to class. She also engaged us with real-world examples that made concepts seem real and tangible. She gave us assignments that forced us to think critically about the world around us. Instead of providing strict guidelines, she challenged us to decide what was appropriate, whether we'd included enough information, and if we "understood the assignment".

Not only have I benefitted from the wisdom imparted by Dr. Richardson, but so have the countless children taught by my fellow cohort members and me. One of the most valuable takeaways I gained from our time together was my framework for advocacy, which developed in our Multicultural Education course as we explored poverty, gender socialization, culturally responsive pedagogy, and diverse populations of students and their families. The chance to dive into these topics has greatly informed my practice as an educator.

If "keeping it real" were a professor, it would be Dr. Chateé Richardson. Her connection to the work of an educator gives her a refreshing relevance and legitimacy that can only come from doing the work. Whether firmly telling me to "get my [stuff] together" or providing space and empathy, Dr. Richardson always knew what I needed and showed she cared. I am blessed to say she still does that today.

## 6. Common Threads

I was nervous to receive and read students' unfiltered feedback. It initially felt like a good idea, but once it was time to read what students wrote I paused because I did not know exactly what content I would encounter. I was greatly optimistic but unsure. As I read through these responses, I am overwhelmed with a myriad of feelings that I struggle to find the words to describe. I am grateful, humbled, honored, awestruck, and in some instances, speechless. I am emotional and I feel like I am doing what I have been called to do [21].

As I analyze student replies, I see common threads that are woven through different responses from students who have not spoken to one another; some who have never met as their time as my students did not overlap. The student responses represent a cross-section of the courses I teach so the sentiments expressed are not tied to feelings elicited by specific course content. This is important to note because the content and curriculum for African Diaspora and the World (where we resituate African people and women in history that has been taught monoculturally beginning in antiquity), Child Psychology (focused on optimal development from conception through adolescence), Multicultural Education (an experiential course where students challenge biases against different facets of identity), and Psychology of the Inner City Child (focused on the trauma children experience in these spaces and how to mitigate the effects) are vastly different. I and my style of student engagement (across an eight-year span) are the common denominators in the equation, and this actually was captured in the themes that arose from response data.

My teaching philosophy and student responses were analyzed pragmatically [19] employing thematic analysis [23]. The process of pragmatism not only searches for occurrences, but how they are actually employed in real-world contexts. I was sifting through the information presented for overlapping threads or patterns between my philosophy and student experiences as well as across their responses. The goal was to allow the data to tell me the student reception or outcomes of my educational praxis. Information is presented in six lists: (1) codes that appeared only in my teaching philosophy (only three broad codes); (2) codes that only arose singularly in one student response (twenty-six experience-specific codes); (3) codes that overlapped in the teaching philosophy and one student response; (4) codes generated between two students; (5) codes appearing in multiple student responses; and (6) codes shared in the teaching philosophy and multiple student responses (between two and up to all ten responses).

Thematic analysis is a stepwise process that begins with reading through qualitative information multiple times to become familiar with it and to notice initial themes and patterns. The next step is to read through it again piece by piece to generate initial codes, creating labels to collapse data. The information is read again to check codes, and they are then combined into themes in an attempt to accurately reflect what is surfacing in the data. Themes are then analyzed to search for shared meaning across the data. The analysis process ends with a meaningful understanding of what is going on within and between the data. Thematic analysis allows you to pull meaning directly from the data. As Braun and Clarke explain, it serves to both accurately “reflect reality” as it is or unfolds, and “to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” to establish meaning [23] (p. 83). It allows for multilayered analysis.

Table 1 represents themes that either only showed up in my teaching philosophy or only showed up once in student responses. There were only three codes that were specific to the philosophy. The codes represented here were broad (enhancing the whole environment) or very specific (continued professional development and engaging in research-based practice). The latter two codes are also very specific to my personal growth process and are not necessarily on display for students to observe. It is good that this is the shortest list of codes. This means that a majority of the codes generated from the philosophy overlapped with at least one student response or also came up for multiple students. This is the first step in understanding that my philosophy is translating into action. The overlapping threads of responses are represented in Table 2. Both tables are presented on page 14 for reference. The symbols used to code themes to separate lists are also shown in the title cell of the table.

I was excited to see all of the overlapping threads across lists three through six. I was particularly surprised and humbled to discover that there were many overlapping threads of multiple student responses to my personal teaching philosophy (represented in list 6). I strive to embody the best practices that I learn and research. This schematic is confirmation that I am authentically engaging in liberatory praxis. The analysis inspires contemplation on how I have presented in the past and inspiration to continue to grow and develop so

that the singular and dual codes (lists 2–4) become less person-specific and more consistent so that they may be shared or experienced by all.

**Table 1.** Singular Themes Schematic.

<b>(1) Teaching Philosophy Only ~</b>	<b>(2) Student Only ≈</b>	
Enhance Overall Environment	Personal Sacrifice	Sense of Pride
Continued Development	Understanding	Dynamic
Research-Based Practice	Guidance	Immersive
	Assistance	Positive Attitude
	Student Comfort in Vulnerability	Though Provoking Prompts
	New Motivation	Significant Contribution
	Home Away from Home	Inspire
	Sense of Pride	Bring Whole Selves
	Enjoyed Learning	Honesty
	Passion for Students	Curiosity
	Conversational	Mutual
	Profound Lessons	Cultural Humility
	Pivotal Courses	Powerhouse
	Knew What I Needed	
<i>n</i> = 3	<i>n</i> = 27	

**Table 2.** Overlapping Themes Schematic.

<b>(3) Teacher and Student *</b>	<b>(4) Two Students +</b>	<b>(5) Multiple Students Φ</b>	<b>(6) Teacher and 2+ Students ⚡</b>
Active Participants in Learning	Excitement	Extraordinary/Amazing Teacher	Confidence (Trusting Voice)
Gain Sense of Self	Support	Selflessness	Passion in Teaching
Non-Judgmental/Open-minded	Sense of Self	Wisdom	Fostering Growth/Better Person
New/Accurate Knowledge	Warm Welcome	Professor Vulnerability	Effective Teaching
Brave Space	Treated as Her Own	Gladness (Joy), Near to Heart	Multiple Perspectives
Metacognition (thinking)	Great Energy	Real World Examples	Creating Community (Bonds)
Diff. Content/Consistent Style	Legacy	Showed She Cares	Build Relationship w/Students
Create Course Experience	Advocacy	Deeper Understanding	Mentor (2nd Mama)
Creative Expression	Advised to take Her Class		Lasting/Positive Impact
Learning Retention			Making Information Meaningful
Willingness to Listen			Safe Space
Authenticity			Unique (Background/Style)
Empathy			Differentiated Delivery
Accountability			Expansive Global Worldview
			Critically Reflecting
			Culturally Responsive
			Challenging/Questioning Biases
			Engagement
			(Re)cognizing
			(Re)visioning
			(Re)fecting
			(Re)mbering
<i>n</i> = 27	<i>n</i> = 18	<i>n</i> = 28	<i>n</i> = 107

Reading through the responses and codes and sitting in contemplation, I am actively and metacognitively thinking about my role in “(re)membering how we liberate”. I am actively thinking about the spirit and responsibility of my work [5]. I am thinking about ways to create professor trainings to ensure more students have transformative and liberatory experiences regardless of environment (PWI vs. HBCU), course subject, or the cultural background of the professor. I discussed earlier that my varied (unique) educational background (drama made me comfortable in front of the classroom and creative in how I approach teaching and learning; counseling psychology taught me how to read people, get to know them, have compassion and empathy, help students to nondefensively see themselves and consider beliefs, get people to see multiple perspectives, and debrief difficult conversations; educational psychology allowed me to understand the physical, emotional, and mental intricacies of how people learn and what happens in the process) has specifically prepared me to be able to engage in this teaching style, and this is true; however, anyone can commit to this work because it all starts with building relationship.

Employing a growth mindset, this is something everyone can learn to do. I am thinking about what things are possible when we simply take the time to get to know who our students are, do the work to understand what they need, and care about not just the outcome, but their learning experience. I am thinking about how we bottle this for others to learn and apply in their personal praxis but keep it dynamic and student-centered. I am thinking about how this translates and what this looks like. I am thinking about awareness and application. I am thinking about my personal calling and dynamic consistency. I am thinking about my next level.

Because I have started with connecting with students as a firm foundation, I have never had a negative experience with this model. Some students become more comfortable than others. There have absolutely been moments of discomfort where I had to work to moderate conversation to a place of balance in terms of students feeling fully heard and understood. However, these students were able to engage in a deeper level of communication and agree to see each other’s perspectives as valid although they were very different because they understand the purpose is not to change one another but to challenge one another and to grow in the process. There have absolutely been moments of student defensiveness and frustration that needed particular care to wade through and massage. Darius Williams mentions how I had to tell and help him to get himself together. None of these things are negative. They are a part of the process that takes understanding, grace, patience, flexibility, and compassion.

I do, however, have to continue to check in with myself and continuously engage in my personal self-care practices as I engage this work at this level of emotional connection. Compassion fatigue, which can lead to exhaustion and burnout, is a real and serious issue of consideration [24]. The trauma-informed, socioemotional, culturally responsive, and compassionate teacher can become a magnet for heavy disclosures. Trust has been built, connections have been formed, and thus a potential pathway to real emotion has been established. There is heavy responsibility here within this space.

There are times when I have to recalibrate because my reserves have been depleted. Sometimes I have to be quiet and breathe or even meditate to recenter. I may have to go outside and sit in the sunshine immediately following a conversation. I may need to take my shoes off and stand or walk in the grass with my bare feet. I need to re-ground myself. I listen to music or engage in leisure reading (I always have a leisure book with me) to return to my happy place. I run or walk consistently (engage physical activity as an outlet). For me it is all worth it and it is necessary work. My students all deserve this level of consideration, concern, and care, and according to the disclosures presented here, they personally feel they are receiving it.

## 7. Conclusions

This was definitely not an easy task to engage in. It was particularly nerve-racking. First, writing about yourself or your personal praxis can be a difficult task. It takes a lot of

introspection and sometimes we just do not want to look that deeply. It is much easier not to. I was taught a long time ago by Cheryl Tawede Grills, one of my most prolific teachers, that once we know we cannot unknow. We must face, analyze, process, engage, and move through the new information. Knowing changes us. We have to sit in discomfort, and we have to shift.

Second, when I asked students to write whatever they wanted about their experiences with me as a teacher, I opened myself up to true critique and unfiltered feedback. I asked them to be honest in their assessment of how I show up as a teacher; no holds barred. This was uncomfortable. A few of my elders have taught me that when we are completely comfortable, we are not growing. This does not mean that we cannot have moments of comfort. Sometimes the learning is comfortable when we are working to remain in a space of accountability. But this is not possible without consistent feedback.

Without any prompting, I see many of the words found in my personal philosophy repeated in student responses. This tells me that I am indeed living up to the legacy of my elders and being who I say I am as an educator. I am not simply doing the work, but I am doing my best work. I learned this from my students in this moment. I thought I was doing something, but now (and I say this with humility) I know and understand that I am. I am clear that I have to continue to engage in introspection and continue this work. (Re)membering is responsibility [5].

I am truly humbled and amazed by my students' words. My heart is full and I am inspired. It is difficult to put all of my feelings into words. I think this is partly because I, like many, continue to battle impostor syndrome (the inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved; not seeing one's own skill or expertise). It is not about deserving though; it is about what I have worked for, and it is about my responsibility. As this article comes full circle, it is about the spirit of this work [5]. It is about the path initiated by my elders, taken up by me, and the legacy passed on to my students. I hope I continue to live up to my elders' expectations, my students' expectations, and my expectations. I will continue to engage in the processes of (re)searching, (re)visioning, (re)cognizing, (re)presenting, and (re)claiming in the process of educating to ensure that I am actually educating and that I accurately see and live my role. I understand from my teachers (the elders who came before me and my students) that honesty, consistency, and continued growth are key to maintaining this liberatory praxis.

As a beginning step to my next level of work as a teacher, I ask the reader to please take a moment and refer back to the end of the introduction where I discussed my teachers who mishandled their responsibility. Think back to the memories and enduring lessons students are left with from these experiences. Think about your own personal experiences sitting in the seat of a learner. I implore you to ask yourself the following question: How will you be remembered?

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