

Article

Unshackling Our Youth through Love and Mutual Recognition: Notes from an Undergraduate Class on School Discipline Inspired by Ta-Nehisi Coates and bell hooks

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Abstract: This research essay challenges educators to embrace mutual recognition when interacting with students. Our data are the words of the young people who participated with us in one particular undergraduate class on school discipline at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, in the United States in the fall of 2022. Tahjuan, who had been our student in the 7th grade in 2011, co-taught the class with us. In writing this essay and in teaching the class, we were inspired by a short passage from Ta-Nehisi Coates about the shackling young people of color endure and another, by bell hooks, that proposes mutual recognition as a teaching practice that can loosen those shackles. Most saliently, this essay is inspired by the youth we work with who, without reading either Coates or hooks, embody Coates' experience and hooks' wisdom. Though we invited and compensated these particular youth to join us in the class as co-teachers and participants, we believe they are broadly representative of the adolescent students we have worked with over the last 15 years in Newark. All the young people quoted in this article have reviewed what we have written and approved its publication. Tahjuan has agreed to include his name as a co-author.



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Ta-Nehisi Coates, in *Between the world and me*, writes about his childhood [1] (p. 25):

If the streets
shackled my right leg,
the schools
shackled my left.

Fail to comprehend the streets,
and you gave up your body now.
But fail to comprehend the schools
and you gave up your body later.

In our years of engagement with Black and Latinx youth in the schools of Newark, New Jersey, we witness, continually, the double-shackling that Coates describes, his own story repeated in the lives of the young people we work with. When we read Coates' passage to them, their response is sometimes one of epiphany, like that of one young man who, on listening to Coates' text, exclaimed, "oh shit, that's true". It is a sudden realization that Coates is verbalizing an experience they are living through, but, until his illumination, they only felt an inchoate inner fog that they could not articulate. If our young people do not respond with a sudden new self-awareness, it is only because the truth of Coates' insights already marks them deeply, like a wound that refuses to heal or a condition from



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which emergence is stifled at every pass. For these young people, Coates reveals nothing they do not already feel within their bodies.

Teachers who value dialogical practices and the reflections they promote have power to loosen the shackles imposed by street and school both through initiating and guiding critical conversations among students and also by refusing to impose the shackles that the educational system, especially when it comes to youth of color, is structured to produce [2–4]. bell hooks [5] poses the possibility of schools being places of ecstasy, where the experience of school education can be joyful and exciting rather than a mechanism to instill “obedience” and “domination”. Indeed, hooks posits that academic education should actualize “the practice of freedom”, a vision that is exhilarating in its breadth and ambition, though it is so distant from the reality in schools. One of the qualities of an education that aligns with freedom and thus has the potential to dissolve the shackling that is so ubiquitous in communities confronting racial and economic oppression is that of “mutual recognition”, the importance for teachers and students to recognize each other as full human beings. Teachers who practice mutual recognition strive to create classrooms in which all are valued and cared for so that the forces preventing self-actualization are dismantled, and the full human potential of every person can be unleashed. hooks writes [5] (p. 8):

As a classroom community our capacity to generate excitement
is deeply affected by our interest in one another,
in hearing one another’s voices,
in recognizing one another’s presence. . . .
Any radical pedagogy must insist
that everyone’s presence is acknowledged. . . .
The professor must genuinely value everyone’s presence.
There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone
influences the classroom dynamic,
that everyone contributes.

Just as our students recognize themselves in Coates’ passage, they grasp, in hooks’ writings, their own plea and demand for mutual recognition as a pre-condition for allowing schools to serve them. Ralph Ellison writes in the first pages of *Invisible Man* [6] (p. 3), “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me”. Mutual recognition demands that everyone in the classroom be seen.

For teachers to make mutual recognition possible, they need to create spaces where students feel free to be themselves and safe enough to allow themselves to be seen. It means they must be comfortable to speak their language and activate their knowledge without fear of punishment, to demonstrate their strengths and talents, and to critically consider the shackles that burden them. These include the shackles imposed by teachers as functionaries of school policy. Failing to prioritize, as Mark likes to say, “purpose over power”, failure, that is, to practice the mutual recognition that hooks sees as essential to the educational mission and demanding, instead, obedience and conformity, is arguably the deadliest shackle that schools institute. This pervasive shackling, disproportionately targeting students of color, is manifested in prioritizing memorization over critical thinking [7,8] and discipline over dialogic engagement. When these measures end up alienating students who then tune out and act up, students—especially young men of color—are suspended and/or often misclassified as special education students [9,10].

1. The Multiple Layers of Mutual Recognition

Though teachers mostly enter the profession with good intentions, too often, they think that their students do not know anything or know only the wrong things, and so they believe they have to lecture and fix them. But teachers who value the mutual recognition between teachers and students that hooks writes about understand that liberatory pedagogy cannot be the teacher raising the class up by themselves in a vertical top-down approach but that it must recognize the collective brilliance of students and facilitate the creation of safe spaces in which ideas can be expressed, explored, and challenged. When this occurs,

students, along with the teachers who engage with them in exploration, can collectively reflect and make sense of their own lives. In this way, the mutual recognition that hooks sees as essential for education as the practice of freedom begins to dismantle the traditional hierarchical (vertical) relationship between students and teachers while simultaneously growing a mutual (horizontal) recognition among students themselves, one in which they see their own histories mirrored in each other's stories—what we call the “me too” moments in a classroom—that begin to bring awareness to the systemic nature of their situation. These moments can also transport teachers with the desire to see the world through their students' eyes to a place where they can empathize with their students' dreams as well as their feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy since they, too, because they are human, have experienced these feelings even if they are from neighborhoods very different from those they serve.

2. Background to Our Project

For more than 15 years, the two of us, Mark and Gene, have introduced young people from Newark to master's pre-service teachers and doctoral education students at various colleges of the City University of New York. In doing so, we intentionally positioned the young people as experts in education, challenging both stereotype stigma [11], which breeds an embodied sense of intellectual inadequacy in many youth of color, and racist frameworks, which position young students of color as “bad” and deficient [12–14] and are often internalized by teachers and by students themselves [15,16]. Rather than entertaining the belief that there is something wrong with black and brown youth, we switched up the dominant lens to focus on what is wrong with the system that positioned them as “being a problem” [17]. Through this journey in teaching, we sought to make it obvious to the young people that they had expertise, experiences, and feelings that mattered and deserved attention within the educational ecosystem.

In the fall of 2022, we facilitated an undergraduate course for education students at Rutgers University in Newark that was called “Radical Teaching, the voices of youth”. We designed the course so that it would be primarily led by young people from Newark, who, like Coates, had been shackled by both street and school. Unlike our previous college classes that mostly focused on only one young person, every session at Rutgers included a few young people positioned as experts on education, though only one of these would be the focus teacher of each class. Our hope was that in doing so, we might generate among the youth present a collective awareness about their shared experiences. We also hoped that being positioned as experts would instill in them a sense that they could, as Freire [18] (p. 109) writes, “intervene in their reality” in order to change it.

Though this essay focuses on the experiences of the youth who participated in one particular class at Rutgers, we intend, in the near future, to write an article on how many of our graduate and undergraduate students, who were teachers or pre-service teachers, were transformed by being in classes taught by the youth from Newark. Suffice it to say here that being taught by youth from Newark was arguably more transformative for many students than the texts by Coates and hooks. We attributed this phenomenon to the sudden reversal of roles in which the young people had become their teachers and, in that role, transmitted their stories with reflexivity, honesty, humor, vulnerability, passion, and immediacy, which made it impossible to dismiss their need and demand for recognition or the damage caused by the shackles employed by schools to suppress their humanity. For example, one of our students reflected, “Something that stood out to me from the session was the idea of creating conditions that allow students to know we actually care. The rapport we have with our students is crucial for their success as well as allowing lessons to relate to them and their culture”. Another commented, “If I keep letting power rule the classroom, my students will either fear me or hate me, and I would not want them to be in an environment like that”. And a third, “The class was the perfect method of highlighting engaged pedagogy—going beyond the textbooks and undergoing alternative teaching techniques to heal the soul of a student who would otherwise go unnoticed”.

3. Introducing Tahjuan

In the fall of 2022, we invited Tahjuan, then 25 years old and without a high school diploma, to teach one of the sessions at Rutgers that focused specifically on school discipline since he is an expert on how to make education a positive experience for students like him.

Mark first knew Tahjuan when he was in the 6th grade, and we both began engaging with him consistently when Mark became his 7th-grade teacher and Gene began working as a literacy mentor to middle schools in Newark. Since 2010, he has been a consistent emissary from Newark, co-teaching many college classes with us. Though Tahjuan was repeatedly suspended from school, we recognized his brilliance, his easy sense of humor and quick wit, and the respect other students had for him despite his school struggles. We understood immediately that his suspensions were punitive measures imposed by teachers who were unwilling or unable to embody the mutual recognition that hooks understands as essential to the creation of a liberatory classroom; instead, they just defaulted to trying to control him. Though we cited hooks and Coates during the Rutgers class, the primary lens through which discussion was framed were videos of Tahjuan when he was in 7th grade, part of the multi-gigabyte archive of videos we have of Tahjuan in schools. Tahjuan came ready to discuss the videos with us and help us reflect upon them with him. In addition to Tahjuan and the Rutgers undergraduates, three youths from Newark who had just graduated high school joined us. We were also joined by three community members and a young man that Tahjuan brought with him from his neighborhood who played an important role in the class as it unfolded.

As will become clear, all the young people in the class who were with us testified, as Coates does, to ways in which both street and school had shackled them. In doing so, they recognized how their various experiences resonated with each other—an indication that the deficit was not within them but within the educational system. They also, without reading hooks, emphasized how mutual recognition was a pre-requisite for educational engagement in schools. In this conversation, the young people from Newark analyzed their own experiences, critiqued the educational system that positioned them as deficient and held out the possibility of positive transformation. It is a testament that mutual recognition was circulating for the two hours we spent together at Rutgers.

4. The Class

Tahjuan began:

“Good afternoon. To teachers, I was considered a bad student”.

With his very first words, Tahjuan echoes, without knowing it, a version of the double-consciousness that DuBois wrote about in 1903, the awareness that he sees himself differently than those who have power in the larger world. Now, Tahjuan picks up the baton from DuBois, from Coates, and from many other great African-American writers and tells us:

“But where I come from, things happen in our lives where **we** are traumatized. So **we** come to school and **we** act in a certain way because **we** go through things.”

Significantly, Tahjuan uses the pronouns “we” and “our” to frame his personal experience, a matter-of-fact recognition that the events that scar him adhere to a pattern shared by his peers, that his trauma represents a larger collective experience that has been woven into the American identity for over 400 years. It is, of course, because of this shared experience and how it has marked all of us who live in the United States that the works of writers like Coates, hooks, and Dubois are so significant.

Tahjuan then focuses in on personal events that shaped him, the inevitable fusing together of school and street shackles.

“Right at the end of my 6th grade year, my father got killed. . . . That was the one who was on me. When he died. I ran up the hill when that happened. His blood chunks was all on the car, his shoes, his teeth was in the tree. I was in 6th grade seeing all of that. So I was going through things.

When he was home, I had good grades. After he passed, there was nobody else I had to listen to. He was the only person that would keep me on track. . . . I was traumatized in a certain way and so I was acting a certain way in school.”

Building on what Tahjuan just told us, we then watched our first video of Tahjuan in Mark’s seventh-grade class as an illustration of how Tahjuan would act in school (Figure 1). The class is discussing the Bill of Rights and, in the scene below, is focusing on the 8th amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment. Significantly, the Bill of Rights was not part of the standard curricula, but we chose to include it because we felt it had important relevancies for our students, none of whom had ever heard of it. In this particular class, we had been reading about a case in the South where the court ruled that teachers had the right to paddle students. As Mark informs the students of the court’s decision, we see Tahjuan getting up from his seat.



Figure 1. Discussing the Bill of Rights.

We stop the video and ask the youth from Newark, the undergraduate students, and the visitors what they think is happening. One undergraduate says it looks as if Tahjuan is charging Mark, is angry at him, and wants to confront him. We watch the rest of the video.

Mark pushes Tahjuan away (Figure 2), saying, “You gonna get paddled too, get out of here”. Tahjuan laughs. The entire class laughs. Tahjuan goes back to his seat, and the class continues.



Figure 2. Mark pushes Tahjuan away.

Tahjuan, in our Rutgers class, reflects:

“When my dad died, I was traumatized, but Mr. C. [Mark] knew what I went through, and he let me get that out; he let me vent and let me express myself the way I wanted to. But I always knew we was in school, so when he said something I could relate to, I probably jumped in his face and said certain things to him. Other teachers would have took that as disrespect, or I’m misbehaving the way I was acting, my language—cursing and all that.”

This jumping-out-of-his-seat and cursing comprise the very type of behavior that Tahjuan got suspended for in other classes:

“Once I got out of Mr. C’s class and I was acting the same way, the teacher didn’t understand me. I got to eighth grade, and I was acting like that, I was getting in trouble. I was getting suspended. 8th grade, yeah, I never went to school. The teacher wanted us to really be quiet like you could hear a pin drop. But I’m in eighth grade, you know what I’m saying? I should be happy to go to school.”

Sophia Fernandez, a recent graduate from a transfer school in Newark who chose to use her real name for this article, sees in Tahjuan’s behavior a version of herself when

she was in the 7th grade, an example of mutual recognition spreading horizontally among students that we addressed earlier:

“He reminds me of me. I was homeless, my dad got deported, I didn’t have no food or nothing”.

She continues:

“I ain’t going to lie, because I know, kinda, what he’s going through because I was the type of kid to get up and—I ain’t going to lie—I had a problem with always leaving the classroom because I have ADHD. You see I can’t stay still, always going in and out of the classroom like sometimes I get up and just peak my head out into the hallway. And the teacher said something, and I said something smart back and he like told me to go to the office. And I had stepped out and he was telling me in the hallway like you got to go to the office, you can’t come [back] into the room and what he does is grab me by the wrists and starts pulling me towards the office. I didn’t like that and I ended up cursing and told him to get off me and he didn’t listen and I said get off me again and at the end I was like get the fuck off me and after that I was about to start swinging because it’s a trigger. And I’m crying at this point.”

The reason Tahjuan’s experience in 7th grade with Mark as his teacher was so radically different from that of Sophia’s experience with her teacher was that Mark and Tahjuan had built a relationship that embraced the mutual recognition advocated by hooks.

“Mr. C. knew what I went through. We had an understanding. He knew what I was trying to do. And I knew what he was trying to do. So I do what I do and then I get back and **let him teach** us.”

Sophia, finding her own language to express the importance of mutual recognition between teachers and students, adds:

“I’m big on teachers having bonds with kids. That’s the one way you can get kids to listen to you. Then he’ll get the education he needs because he’ll want to listen to you”.

Without reading hooks, Tahjuan and Sophia articulate the importance of mutual recognition between teacher and student because they have experienced school with and without it. Sophia gives voice to the idea that if her teacher had sought to understand her rather than to control and discipline her, the event she described could have led to recognition rather than punishment. Meanwhile, in their back and forth, Tahjuan and Sophia affirm each other and recognize themselves. Their stories make clear that when power over students becomes more important to the teacher than recognition, students will fight the teacher for the prize of power (refusing to come to class, coming out “swinging”, and cursing them out) rather than for the prize of building their academic and social knowledge.

We watch another video of Tahjuan in 7th grade (Figure 3). Mark is trying to get the class to focus on a writing assignment in which the students are asked to give supportive reasons for their stance on cruel and unusual punishment. As Mark is speaking, Tahjuan, again, leaps up from his seat to face him.

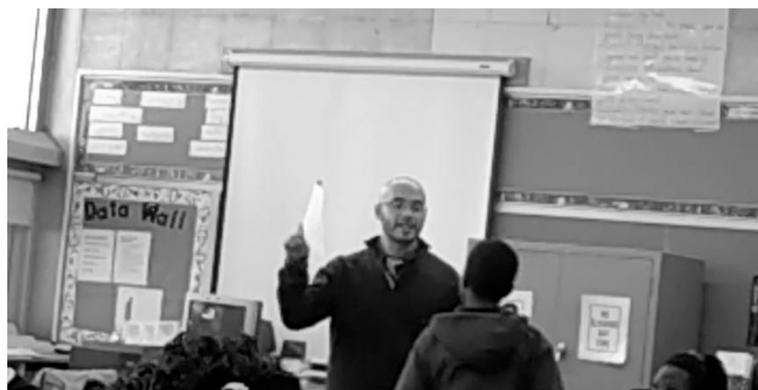


Figure 3. Tahjuan leaps out of his seat to face Mark.

Mark, seeing Tahjuan approach him, walks towards him causing Tahjuan to retreat backwards towards his seat. As this dance takes place, Mark says, “Because I was looking at some people, I don’t want to say their names, but their reason pretty much all seem to be the same”. Having sat down momentarily, Tahjuan shoots up again and says: “But I’m looking at somebody that got a bald head,” [and then as he retreats back to his seat] “who looks like they ain’t shave right this morning”. Mark and Tahjuan are both laughing, as is the rest of the class. Tahjuan reflects:

“He made a little comment about me, I made a little comment back, if you see, everybody just laughed, like it’s regular. Those classes could be long, so I used to feel like I got to do certain things, get a laugh, something just to get the minutes by because we be sitting down in that class for so long, but I feel glad that he was comfortable with me reacting like this because who knows. . . . because some teachers would take that as disrespect. You would have to be a cool teacher to let things like that by.”

Humor, as Bakhtin [19] pointed out, can equalize the power dynamic between members of a community and help put everyone on a level terrain, if only momentarily. Mark is not threatened by Tahjuan making fun of him—indeed, he laughs as well at Tahjuan’s joking—and this helps create a class atmosphere where students feel they can be themselves and have fun in school without being punished. But as Tahjuan makes clear almost immediately, most teachers, fearing student humor will reduce their authority and control of the class, default to exerting power. Indeed, far too often, as the research has established, students who act as Tahjuan acted with Mark are exiled to special education and labeled as deficient, an example of school shackling that can have a devastating effect on a student’s trajectory [9].

“The only kids who could get away with things like that were the special ed kids, because it looked like something was wrong with them. You would see them in the hallway all the time, like not in line, while we all lined up. To be honest, I used to be trying to do things bad to get over there where they were at, because the teachers would let them do whatever, you know, because those minutes in the class could seem long as hell. Sitting there all day—you got to stand up, do certain things. But Mr. C. said, “there’s nothing wrong with you”. . . . I never liked school, to be honest. I still don’t like school. But Mr. C. could handle me. . . . The bond we had, made me want to go to school. He made me always want to come to school just by letting me be myself.”

Tahjuan’s comments reveal his embodied knowledge of what the statistics tell us about black and brown kids being disproportionately (mis)placed in special ed settings because teachers can not “handle” them. As Tahjuan illuminates, one of the reasons for the mishandling is that teachers do not want to, or do not know how to, let students be themselves and still maintain order in the classroom. The shackling of student possibilities

that are revealed in disproportionate special education classification are rooted in the failure of building mutual recognition between students and teachers. In our Rutgers class, some of the youth from Newark who were there with us had indeed been shunted into special education only because teachers could not “handle” them. The young man whom Tahjuan brought with him to class spoke up for the first time:

“That’s the same like I used to act in school. But I got kicked out. I got suspended. Teachers didn’t like me.”

“I wasn’t in the regular class. I was in a BD [Behavioral Disability] class. I felt like they treated us different from every other class. They treat them a certain way, and when they get around us they tense up and act scared like we animals or something. And they brought regular kids to our class and told them, “You want to be bad, then go in here”. They made it seem like we were the worst class in the building. I used to feel, like why do you have to act like that. Like we—there’s nothing wrong with us, just because we got a label on our class don’t mean there’s something wrong with us.”

Sophia joins the conversation:

“Not only that. I’m a witness because I went to school with him actually. I was a witness. Sometimes they would even accompany you to the bathroom, walk with you.”

Tahjuan interrupts:

“Yeah. Like you would be monitored.”

Sophia:

“And I would continue to get up. . . They tend to say you’ll never be nothing in life, sometimes they can be the reason why you’ll never be nothing in life.”

And Tahjuan:

“Some teacher said that to me. She just didn’t want to be bothered with me at all. . . . No kid will just get up and be bad. . . . No kid just got that going on “today I’m going to be bad”. Sometimes if you sit down and talk and listen, we’ll break it down for you, but we don’t ever get asked, so what do we do? We come to school, throw things around, . . . doing things of that nature and you think that’s terrible, he’s bad, but we got things going on and there’s nobody to talk to.”

And Sophia:

“My brother was in BD too, and mind you this kid, right now he goes to church, he’s singing for the church, he’s good, he’s not bad. It’s just me and him have a hitting problem. He was a little bit more worse than me, so in 7th and 8th grade he ended up being in BD class. I’m shocked I never got into it. I always had an aide with me, but I was never in a BD class.”

Notice, the special education class is seen as being for “bad” kids, not for kids who just need extra help. These kids are disproportionately kids of color, kids that teachers and school staff refuse to see because they just assume that they will be “nothing in life”.

We watch a third video (Figure 4). The class is still talking about the Bill of Rights. Mark is talking about cruel and unusual punishment, but Tahjuan is thinking about the First Amendment, a copy of which he is holding in his hand.



Figure 4. Tahjuan asserts the importance of the First Amendment.

Tahjuan interrupts Mark, “I’m going to start carrying this shit in the car”. Mark tries to refocus the group, but Tahjuan persists, “Next officer that pull me over Bitch, Number 1, yeah. Bye Bitch”. The class breaks out into laughter.

Tahjuan, watching the clip now with the rest of us at Rutgers, starts laughing. Actually, we are all laughing. Tahjuan says:

“That shit be cracking me up. What was I thinking about? I don’t be thinking, I just be talking. I be cursing and stuff.”

Mark, as the dialogical teacher, pushes Tahjuan to interrogate himself about what he means:

“So, Tahjuan, you lifted up this idea of language. You bring this up all the time when we talk about this clip and you bring it up in the next clip too. Why?”

Tahjuan answers:

“Because, you know, we joking, playing and all that, but I don’t know, when I be watching it I be like, damn, I be using foul language and we got to show this to people, even though you trying to get them to understand, I be like, damn, I don’t like when I be cursing and doing all of that in class like that. I don’t know why. I knew exactly what I meant and what I was talking about with that situation, but when I be expressing myself sometimes, I just curse, and then I look and I don’t know why I was cursing. Even though it was nothing bad, but it’s good to be code switching. You know I’m in school and that language is not for school, you know what I’m saying.”

Gene asks:

“You got everybody to laugh. Don’t you think you enjoyed that?”

Tahjuan:

“I did, I did. But I’m older now. I was 12 then, I’m 25 now. That’s a fact.”

It is easy to get distracted by students’ language in the classroom, and just as Tahjuan and his peers in the Rutgers class reacted to the cursing rather than to the reasons for Tahjuan saying what he said, too often teachers respond to the language itself, and to supervising the language, rather than interrogating and unraveling the ideas that the language is intended to convey, ideas that are often not fully visible even to the students expressing them. Sophia and Monty (pseudonym), another Newark youth who is with us, grasp that the common instinct of teachers to “correct” vocabulary when vocabulary is not the topic of the lesson can turn the classroom into a hostile space.

Sophia says:

“To be honest, I don’t think teachers should make cursing a big thing because sometimes that’s just how people express themselves. . . .What bothers me is when a teacher gets mad when a kid curses in class and they’ll get extremely in trouble for it. Ok, I’ll apologize. But sometimes that’s just how they express themselves. Like me, I talk, and I use curse words in my talking but I’m not disrespecting nobody. I think it should only be a problem if you’re using it disrespectfully.”

And Monty:

“As long as it’s not disrespectful, it’s not like a big problem. I’d say, . . . it’s the teacher’s job to try to get them to decrease how much they curse, instead of like bashing them.”

Rather than engaging students in dialogic conversation about the ideas they are working through and the language that can best express those ideas, students get into “extreme trouble” and get “bashed” for expressing themselves, the reverse of purpose over power and one more example of how schools shackle students in ways as detrimental to them as the shackling that occurs in the streets.

In the next video (Figure 5) we showed the class, Tahjuan and the two of us began to explore *why* Tahjuan said that he was going to start “carrying this shit [by which he meant the First Amendment] in the car” with him. Our questions push Tahjuan to examine those reasons rather than just allude to them without serious consideration, and the stories those questions elicit not only expose the shackles of the streets but suggest how schools, when they address those shackles in the context of mutual recognition, can help to undo them. The video begins with the three of us together, watching the video discussed above.

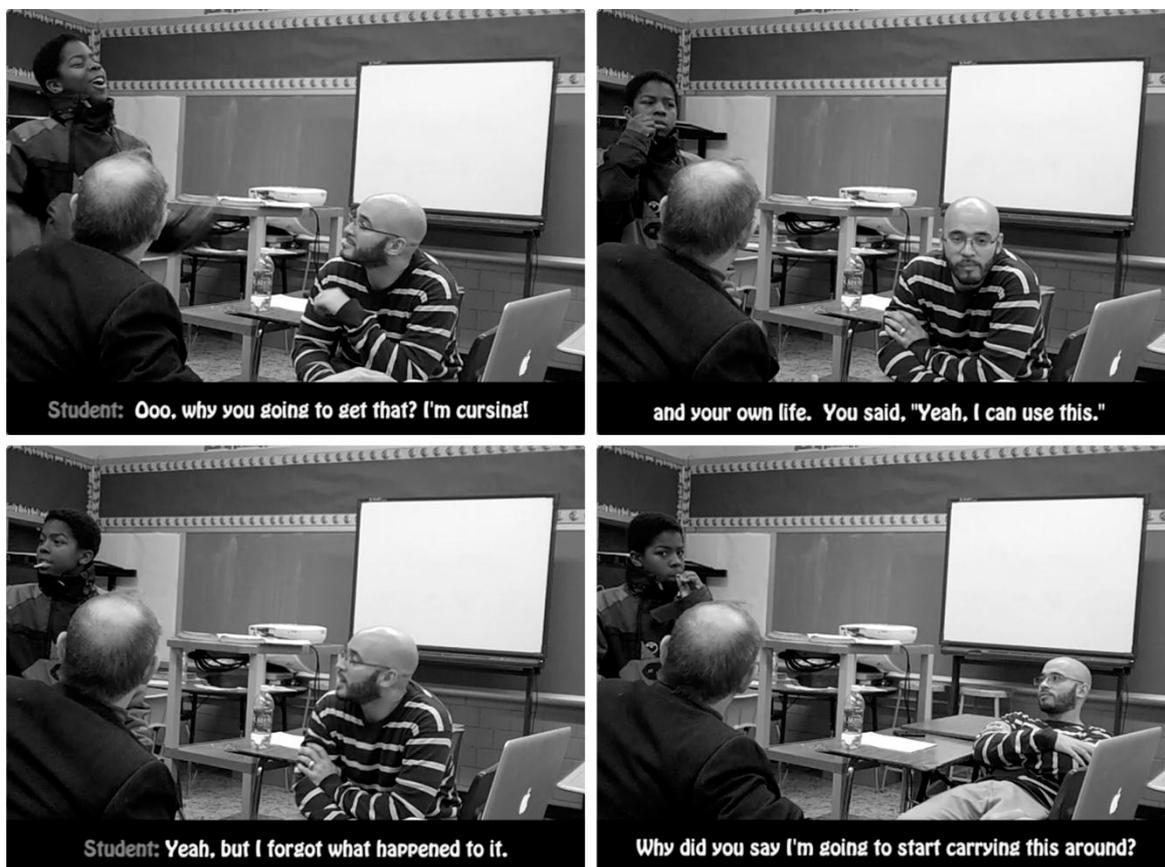


Figure 5. Tahjuan, Mark and Gene reflect on what Tahjuan said in class.

In the video, Tahjuan's first reaction to seeing himself talking about the amendments is to focus on his language, "Ooo... I'm cursing". Mark, not getting distracted by the language, suggests an interpretation of Tahjuan's words, "You said, 'Yeah, I can use this'". Tahjuan replies, "Yeah, but I forgot what happened to it". Mark continues the probing, "Why did you say I'm going to start carrying this around?" Tahjuan first says, "I forgot", but then tells us two stories. The first is when he and a friend were stopped by the cops in a mostly white neighboring town. T's friend cursed at the cops for demanding that they get on the sidewalk, and the cops, in reaction, threatened to arrest them. Tahjuan tells us, "That's before I knew my amendment rights". In the second story, the cops accused Tahjuan of being a drug dealer and the cop "put a gun to my head... and I knew nothing about the amendment rights. . . . I was scared. They said, 'get down before I F-ing shoot you, and they put the gun right to my head'".

In the video, we see 12-year-old Tahjuan, guided by our questions, reflecting back on the events that underpinned his classroom interruption and bringing into speech a felt but previously unarticulated understanding. Tahjuan's rememberings revealed that the humor animating his outbursts, and the curses he used to express himself, concealed experiences of trauma that particularize and personalize the street shackles that Coates writes about. Furthermore, it is clear that the lesson on the amendments was meaningful to him and empowering, altering his previous view that he just had to submit to police power (though challenging that power for someone like Tahjuan obviously carries its own risks).

Now, at Rutgers, 13 years after the videos were taken, Tahjuan retells the story that prompted his outburst and reflects on the importance of knowing one's constitutional rights, which was the purpose of the lesson and still marks him:

"They [the cops] don't like it when you know your rights. I'm talking from experience. You start talking about your rights to them, they don't like that. Because they expect us to not know. You know things like that, that gets them pissed off even more. Trust me."

"When I watch that video now, I be like, damn, I'm like 12. I'm 25 now and that stuff's still happening, you feel me? But we live like it's normal. I'm acting a certain way toward them [the police] because they made me feel like, ya suppose to be here to serve and protect me, but ya make me feel like I gotta protect myself from ya now."

But then Tahjuan segues from his memory of the events recalled in the video to the mutual recognition that he and Mark were able to develop and that was able to make school a force for unshackling, a refuge in which the shackles of the street were able to momentarily recede so that, instead of feeling as if "*I got to protect me from you'all*", Tahjuan feels that he can be recognized for who he actually is.

"I feel I can open up to Mr. C. I know he ain't going to be looking at me different. He can feel my pain, what I'm going through. I've been going through this for years. It's what makes me who I am now. A lot of teachers don't understand because most—they from Westville, they from Plainfield [mostly white affluent cities]—they can't relate to what we're going through. They just see a bad-ass kid: he's trouble, I don't want him in my class, I can't handle him."

"We just traumatized. A lot of things happen to us, our families, we see a lot, we just react differently. Holding it in will hurt you. Mr. C. knew that. The next teacher didn't understand that. That is why I had problems in 8th grade a lot, getting suspended for things that you see I be doing. After the next year, I was getting suspended for the same things."

In Tahjuan's statements, we can, again, hear Ellison's [6] protagonist declare, "They see everything . . . except me". But we also hear Tahjuan affirm what hooks writes, repeated here again because of its vital importance to pedagogy, liberation, and the importance of being seen within school.

As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence.

The young man Tahjuan brought to class with him echoes the need for mutual recognition:

"I had one teacher, her name was Miss D, she used to do the same thing [Mark does], pull me to the side, talk to me. I had the same exact bond, every time everybody used to go to her, "how do you handle him," you got to talk to him, let him be. And she actually start helping me get my grades up. She's the reason I got out of BD. I used to feel like everybody who was not in BD was better than me."

5. The Shackles of the Street and the Possibilities of Mutual Recognition

The young people from Newark who participated in our class at Rutgers, like so many students of color across the country, are not just aware of the shackling that comes with being Black in America but are intensely sensitive, even without having read Coates, to the immediacy of the survival demands of being in the streets. They understand that the streets are enticing because they provide a reward now, which is central to that street shackling, versus the schools that promise a reward later. They make that clear to each other and to anyone else that they will trust with their stories. Monty explains:

"A black boy is always going to be forced to grow up. That's why, a lot of times, you see young men having kids at a young age because growing up as a black man, your life expectancy is short so you trying to do everything in a grown man's life at one time. In some situations, you're forced to be a man."

And Tahjuan:

"Yeah, the streets, one foot in and one foot out, It'll always be like that in the streets. Even though you trying to not be in the streets and always things that happen to a family member or friend, a death or something that have you go back—even though you know you don't get nothing out of it—something happen to one of your bros or something like that, you know two wrongs don't make a right but in your mind your angry and filled up all the time you feel like you have to go and do whatever just to—because of what happened to your bro, and that's why when a person try not to be in the streets then something happens to somebody that they love or was close to so much, then they feel like they just gotta jump back in the streets. I don't know, that's just how it be."

And Monty in response:

"What they getting at, it's also the way the streets is set up. Alright, you're going to school, you're learning math, all of that, in the streets, counting money. With getting money itself, there's a lot of money inside the streets. Making money is like a drug. Some people look at money as way more important than learning in school. You know what I'm saying. It depends. Its kids that's tied to the streets that ain't never did nothing a day in their life that's just related to the specific people that's in the streets, so then they got to watch out for they selves and everybody around them. So it's a hard thing."

Coates reminds us that the decision is between giving "up your body now" and giving "up your body later". If schools only offer a distant possibility of success and can not offer something of immediate value, then the choice is simple. hooks tells us, however, that schools could offer an immediate reward, one that feeds the spirit and the mind. She writes that schools could be places of "ecstasy" [5], self-actualization, and exciting the imagination. We see through the stories of our own students, however, how schools too often seek, instead, to humiliate, reduce, and destroy our youth of color by refusing to

recognize them as brilliant, thoughtful, complex human beings with ideas that deserve to be interrogated. But it does not have to be that way, as this class at Rutgers demonstrated. School officials do not need to accept the role of disciplinary functionaries and “docile” [4] executors of school curricula, and they do not have to police language and humor that is not meant to be injurious. Instead, they can welcome, validate, and seriously engage the knowledge students bring into the classroom with them. They can encourage students to be themselves and guide them to reflect on themselves and their dreams and aspirations without fear of punishment. This takes work, commitment, and, dare we say it, love—not the Hallmark variety but the type that grows from being willing to really see and then recognize, trust, and believe in one another. Our students did not read hooks, but they understood and felt these possibilities.

Tahjuan, by being recognized as an expert on his own trajectory, by being invited to teach classes both at Rutgers and elsewhere, and by being loved by Mark for who he was, began to find in himself a mission that he could be proud of. Though he is not yet able to fully unshackle himself and still has one foot in the streets, he is able—in good part because of his experience teaching with us—to think critically about the shackling of him and his “bros” and work towards being an uplifting force in his community. This, in turn, helps his peers to recognize their own possibilities within their common experiences. When Tahjuan told his peers that he was teaching college students and professors, and when they did not believe him, he brought along one of his mentees to prove it:

“You know I’ve been doing this since I was 12. Teaching classes in how to deal with kids like me. When I be breaking it to the bros about things like this, they use to me a certain way, they laugh . . . They don’t know this side of me, “You what? You gonna do what? Get out of here. No you’re not”. So I’m going to bring you with me to show you we could be street *and* hood. So I’m just trying to enlighten the bros, . . . I’m just showing there are different things we do than just be in the hood. I’m in the hood doing street stuff too, but I know how to switch up. This is why he’s here [indicating the friend he brought with him]. My other brother, K, I brought him with me one time too. I want to show them different things cause like I’m somebody that really matters, so I be feeling like if they see me doing things they can feel like they can do this. If I can do it, you can do it. Because a lot of the bros in my hood, all they know is the hood. I just brought bro to show him different things that I’m capable of doing other than just being in the hood. I hope he’s inspired in the right way, you know what I’m saying. Because he a little different. He a little hot head. So, to break him out it, and for him to like it, I feel I’m doing something, you feel what I’m saying. . . . I love my little brother. . . . This ain’t my blood, you know, . . . This not my mother’s son, This ain’t nobody, but I love him. . . This is my little brother. I just want to show him other things.”

6. This Ain’t Nobody, but I Love Him and Want to Show Him Other Things

Tahjuan’s experience teaching others, of being positioned and recognized as an authority on the lives of young men like him, helped transform how he thought of himself. In the process, it challenged, though it did not remove, the formidable double shackling that he experienced. But even though Tahjuan may still have one foot in the streets, and even though most teachers and schools refused to recognize, scaffold, and celebrate his brilliance, his work with us helped him to see what he is capable of and what he can aspire to. Not only has he embraced his role of educating educators, he has also made it his mission to guide his “bros” to see and then fulfill their full human capabilities and aspirations beyond what he has been able to do so far. He wants them to know that they “matter”. He wants to “to inspire. . . in the right way.” Even though the young man he brought with him to class “ain’t nobody, . . . I love my little brother. I just want to show him other things”.

It is that love that makes possibility accessible. In schools, between students and teachers, that love takes the form of mutual recognition, and it necessitates desire, embodiment,

and putting in the work. It demands seeing somebody in every “nobody” and “hearing their voices”, “recognizing their presence”, “valuing” their contributions [5], and sharing and building knowledge with them rather than imposing information on them. It is mutual recognition, made possible by love and coming to fruition through it, that can begin the process of dissolving the shackles that Coates writes about and that our students carry within them.

Mutual recognition means that everyone “matters”. If teachers, as Sophia related, “say you’ll never be nothing in life” or, as Tahjuan’s friend said, “act scared like we’re animals or something”, then mutual recognition dies. All the young people who were with us at Rutgers on the day Tahjuan taught the class understood this and recognized, in each other’s stories, narratives that applied to themselves. Tahjuan: “The bond we had made me want to come to school”. Sophia: “I’m big on teachers having bonds with kids. . . Then he’ll get the education he needs because he’ll want to listen to you”. Tahjuan’s friend: “I had the same exact bond with Mrs. D. And she actually helped me get my grades up”.

Towards the end of our Rutgers class, Mark reflected on the shared experiences of both the shackles and the moments when those shackles became less constricting:

“Tahjuan you lifted this up—your story is the same as his story [M]. . . and the same as your story [Sophia] even though you were in another building, and the same as yours in a school in another place in the city [an undergraduate student]. And we had a young man from Mobile Alabama who was here, who said, yeah, this is exactly how my high school was also. There is something that is happening that makes this true not just in North Newark, but in all of Newark, across New Jersey, and across the country.”

Mark intentionally connected the individual experiences of the youth we work with to systemic oppression rooted in 400 years of American history. But students are not destined to just be victims, and they are not defined by their shackles alone; they have agency and can, as Tahjuan demonstrates, begin the process of “emerging” from their “situation” in order to transform their lives [18]. Teachers can play a central role in bringing awareness to that agency and scaffolding it through mutual recognition. The imperative to do so is urgent. As Tahjuan reminds us:

“There are more kids that are like me. I’m not the only one. There are a lot of them like me. My school was filled by kids like me.”

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