

The One Word That Changes Everything About Teaching and Learning

By [Josh Parker](#) on August 29, 2018 8:17 AM

"The best teacher...is the teacher who can convey to [black and brown students] an awareness that they do indeed come from somewhere, some place of human value, and that what they've learned there does count in the larger society."

-Ralph Ellison, [What these Children Are Like](#)

Welcome back to school!

In most places, the prior year's test results have been revealed, the teaching assignments have been finalized and the finishing touches around the school building have been completed. There is almost nothing like back-to-school energy! It is my earnest hope that as this blog enters into a second year, the words I write inspire, provoke and encourage everyone who reads them to become the best they can be for the students of color in their care. For that to happen there is one word that has to be at the center of our instructional plans and decisions: **worth**.

What is a student of color's academic success worth to you?

This question is not answered with words. We answer this question through the daily decisions we make concerning the quality of their instruction and the ways in which we welcome who they are outside of our schools into the hallways, classrooms and common areas inside of our schools. We answer this question by the amount of time and effort we place in learning about who they are, what makes them great and building an instructional program that centralizes their. So I ask again, what are black and brown kids worth to you?

This question of worth in regards to educating black and brown students has been asked throughout our history as a country. 85 years ago, Carter G. Woodson questioned it and offered a frightening school-to-real life connection in *The Miseducation of the Negro*:

This crusade is much more important than the anti-lynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom. Why not exploit, enslave, or exterminate a class that everybody is taught to regard as inferior?

30 years after that, the idea of worth in regards to students of color and our education system was mused about by Ralph Ellison in his essay *What These Children are Like*:

Something basically wrong is happening to our educational system. We are missing the target, and all of our children are suffering as a result. To be ill-clothed, ill-housed and ill-fed is not the only way to suffer deprivation.

Ellison's talk came only one month after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech and 35 years before the high watermark moment of hip-hop's crossover into the mainstream was born: Jersey M.C., Lauryn Hill's epic 'The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill' album. The album begins in a classroom just after the bell rings, with a teacher taking attendance. The name he lands on and keeps repeating is - "Lauryn Hill...Lauryn Hill..." She was absent from school, yet proceeded to give a class period worth of lessons on life, love and loss, culminating in the title track which again questions the usefulness of being educated in a system (and society) not built on her worth:

**And every time I try to be, what someone else has thought of me
So caught up, I wasn't able to achieve**

And so, 65 years after Carter G. Woodson critiqued our educational system, the nation's first hip hop album to win a grammy for album of the year opines that she had to 'define her own destiny.' Unfortunately the question of worth is still being answered today in flagging test scores that are color-coded. There seems to be a collective shrug from schools and system-based leaders when these results come back. Year after year. Decade after decade. The shrug is not in our statements, intentions or plans. It is in our lack of adaptive change.

It is high time for us to try a different way.

This different way views black and brown students' lives as critical to the academic success of our classrooms. Fundamentally, if we do not build an infrastructure around the inherent worth of black and brown students, which will benefit **all students**, how can they be assured of receiving a quality education? In educating our children, we may win some, but we just lost one. And another one. And another one. We are losing the brilliance of too many students of color principally because of a flawed design. Considering this design and its historical roots, it is just as important to be an anti-racist school system or classroom as it is to be a 'high-performing' one.

Below are three ways we can rediscover and build upon the inherent brilliance, resilience and power of black and brown students to shape the environments where they spend the majority of their childhood.

1. Learn students; master content. Develop a thorough fund of knowledge of your children. All of them. Especially the black and brown ones. Learn about their history outside of the classroom and then go live in it. Not literally. But, almost. Get up close and personal with where they live, how they experience joy and the stuff they dream about. Then look at their scores. Gather the data that is relevant to helping them progress to being college and career ready. Find the data points that make the difference and make it your shared mission (with each student and their family) to get them to where they need to be by the end of the school year. Next, learn your content and standards so thoroughly that you can help them get to where they need to go with masterful questioning, building of background knowledge and **other interventions**. Do not let interventions be the lesson, let them be the cushion around it. Scaffolding is never meant to stay on a building ad infinitum. They must be engaged in productive struggle with complex tasks (and texts). Your refusal to let them develop this muscle will forever hold them back. If they are worth a future, they are worth being put in positions that develop their ability to choose one for themselves. What is their academic success worth to you?

2. Center the black and brown experience within teaching and learning. While your district may have a curriculum for you to use; this is where anti-racist courage has to be front and center in what makes you a teacher. Ultimately, you determine the dialogue, texts and ideas that your students are exposed to. Whether they are white, black or brown, ALL students benefit from content that places the experiences (both positive and negative) of people of color at the center. When instruction is positioned through this construct, we can better understand the role that institutions, laws and media have played in the current realities of people of color throughout this nation. If they are worth teaching, they have to be worth learning about. What are black and brown students worth to you? How do you show it?

3. Build your own accountability system. For the most part, there is no incentive for teaching children of color well. Which is to say, there is no real penalty for their miseducation. In a majority of school districts across the country, students of color fail at alarming rates; while the principals and teachers ostensibly responsible for their outcomes incur no mark on their record, no reduction in salary and no jeopardizing of job status. While I am **not** advocating for any one of these solutions, this current dialectic that separates job performance and security from the outcomes of students of color actually serves to pull back the curtain on what we say re: equity and how we act on it in practice. How will you make these students' lives truly matter as it relates to how you see yourself as a teacher. One way is to build your own accountability structure.

First, set your own goal for what you believe your students of color should achieve within a year of being taught by you. The minimum aim should be for 80% of students of color to be showing mastery of grade level standards and content as measured by the CCSS or your states' equivalent standards by the end of the year. The. Minimum. Next, create the learning plan for each student of color to

achieve the end of year goals (these actions should also outline what you will do to support the progress). Make the plan public. Put it on your Twitter, your Instagram and or the school's webpage. Make sure that the parents and all of the stakeholders in each child's life know about and help with the plan. The next step in the process is setting benchmarks to track progress towards these goals. Finally, state what you are willing to lose if 80% of your students do not reach their goal. It could be time, talent or treasure. Sadly, when I reflect on some decisions that I made in my career, I should have set up more accountability for myself than my own self-criticism. This is not about placing more burden on us as teachers, but it is about putting our money where our mouths are.

Although I live in Baltimore, I love Giordano's pizza from Chicago. I mean, love. I don't eat it often, because of the calories (don't judge me). If I ever ordered a nice, fresh, piping hot pizza and it came out cold. Or frozen. Would I not ask for it to be finished? And if that did not work, would I ask for my money back? Wouldn't you? Do our children have that option if they leave a grade with unfinished learning? What are we saying about their worth when their failure as children incurs no penalty on us as adults? And where has that gotten us? Consequence is no coincidence.

What a statement about worth we could make if we donated a portion of our (I know, already meager) salary to an after-school program supporting literacy or the general summer enrichment of our students when we fail to help them meet their goals? What would our government and officials be saying about their worth if our salaries got a 20% bonus for helping most of them reach their end of year goals? Without any skin in the game or any mandated incentive around teaching these children well, we are building a system where their failure is risk-free.

I believe we all want our kids to win. However, our intentions are not matching outcomes. And we cannot blame the children. We went to college for this. We then went to more college and endured (attended) professional development session after professional development session to better serve them. If they fail repeatedly, we have to own it. If not, then we have actually built a system around our own job security, not the inherent value of the freedom of black and brown kids. At that point, nothing even matters at all.

Nearly 100 years after Missouri passed a law that forbade **'the teaching of reading and writing to slaves,'** a judge in Detroit reaffirmed this commitment to devaluing black literacy. In a ruling released just five days before this year's Fourth of July holiday, Judge Stephen Murphy of Detroit stated that students in that majority-black school district had **'no right to access literacy.'** He later essentially said that as long as the schools run, then that was all that was required. We must operate our classrooms and schools in such a way that demonstrably shows that we don't actually hold the same

view in practice. Valuing our students of color cannot be reduced to making sure they are safe and in their seats. That should be a basic human right.

'The work' is about doing the deep reflection and learning necessary to erect systems of teaching and learning that value the presence of students of color. As the leader of Unbound Ed, Kate Gerson always says - the gap is on us. It is our gap. Now, let's mind the gap and eliminate it. Like my colleague Tom Rademacher famously wrote, **it won't be easy**. However, if in 20 years, we are not still having these outcomes permeate our country, it will all be worth it. Teaching is supposed to inspire, so how come we ain't gettin' no higher?

Let's get to work:

Resources

1. **Bias Toolkit** by Unbound Ed (set of resources and protocols)
2. **Everyday Anti-Racism: Getting Real About Racism** in Schools by Mica Pollock (book)

Inspirational/Instructional Video

1. **Teaching and Being Ratchetdemic** by Dr. Chris Emdin

Bonus Video

1. **Footlockers and Fridays** by Lacey Robinson

"I am beginning to think that the only thing wrong with black [students] is that we actually think something is wrong with them." -Dr. Ibram X. Kendi