

# From Learning Loss to a Liberatory Mindset



## Premium Resource

At the start of the pandemic, in 2020, there were sudden shifts in ways the nation thought about education. Learning goals and assessment measures broadened beyond achievement on standardized tests, and schools focused on the importance of engaging children in learning that felt meaningful to them and their families.

But now, nearly three years later, the learning loss narrative has boomeranged the nation back to its bedrock approach to education—a hyper-fixation on data that measures student achievement. Societal messages that Black and Brown students are academically behind are ubiquitous. And predictably, this

fixation proliferates deficit-oriented narratives about these and other historically marginalized groups that delegitimizes their educational experiences and denies their gifts and academic potential (Smith, Johnson, & Owens, 2022). Despite all our hopes that the dramatic shifts needed during the pandemic might ultimately change education for the better, it seems we are in many ways back where we started. Before COVID-19, the phrase learning loss was commonly used to describe the summer slide. Educators often blamed summer break as a major cause of students' academic setback. Today's repackaged learning loss narrative, however, emerges from a long history of performance-based narratives and policies in education such as the achievement gap, A Nation at Risk, "failing schools," No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top.

These approaches have resulted in pedagogical practices focused on fixing children rather than fixing systems that perpetuate structural racism—a process of schooling that education researchers Christopher B. Knaus and Rachelle Rogers-Ard refer to as "educational genocide" (2012). When school leaders rush to invest in tests, isolated technology programs, and boxed curricula that promise only to raise scores on standardized assessments, schools can become spaces where children are disengaged from learning, languishing in classrooms where they believe that they are not capable or worthy of vibrant, challenging, thought-provoking curriculum.

Of course, schools must work to address the academic needs of students. Opportunity gaps have been endemic in the U.S. educational system. This unequal distribution of resources and opportunities is a result of the longevity of systemic racism. The pandemic exposed significant inequities between and within schools. This must be redressed. But leaning into learning loss ideologies results in leaning away from thinking about the purpose of teaching and learning and returning to inequitable practices that have dominated educational spaces for decades. There has to be a better way.

## A Vision of What's Possible

In 2021, when schools returned to brick-and-mortar learning, I interviewed a New York City 3rd grade teacher, who I will call Yvonne, to inform my thinking about culturally responsive curriculum writing practices. Yvonne identifies as an antiracist educator and activist, and I was curious how she was resisting the learning loss narrative.

Yvonne said she was always careful not to let her teaching become static and detached from the lived experiences of the children in her classroom. She had been given a popular boxed argument-writing curriculum, and she wanted to find a way to transform it to engage her Black and Brown learners in challenging, identity-affirming ways. She knew she could "do more" with the scripted curriculum purchased by her school.

Before teaching any unit, she carefully considered how she could apply the lessons to her particular learners. For example, when her students were learning about persuasive writing, to "frame" the unit, Yvonne used an upzoning proposal in their community that would involve demolishing the local supermarket and laundromat to make space for a multistory luxury building. In this way, she shifted the curriculum away from "generic" topics such as saving the whales or campaigning for chocolate milk in the cafeteria and reframed it to focus on an issue that was important, immediate, and urgent to her students.

Yvonne's students formulated reasons and backed them up with evidence, as mandated by state standards. But how she went about teaching this was radically different from what a scripted curriculum, taught by many as a one-size-fits-all approach, could offer. Students used their skills to write to their council member to argue why the upzoning proposal should be suspended. They learned about civic engagement, the role of council members, affordable housing, gentrification, environmental racism, and activism. Then her students led a virtual teach-in where they shared their experiences and knowledge with more than 100 parents, students, and community members and gave suggestions for how to take action. Yvonne's students' engagement skyrocketed because their learning was authentic and relevant to their experiences.

"I'm a firm believer that the work we do in a unit or in a curriculum doesn't just stay in school—it needs to transfer to their real lives," says Yvonne. "We're in the business of building humans who can do more than just what we assign them in the classroom."

## Leaning into a Liberatory Mindset

Taking a cue from educators like Yvonne, we need to focus less on learning-loss narratives and more on ways to enrich our curriculum and make it culturally relevant to our students. Culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining teaching (CRRST) helps educators engage students academically, socially, and politically. It requires teachers to truly know the culturally and racially diverse students and communities they serve, to learn about the values and dreams of communities, to recognize other powerful ways of knowing and being in the world, and to leverage their understanding of this knowledge to teach in ways that are affirming. It also requires educators to acknowledge and address systemic and structural racism, not always an easy task for a field where 79 percent of U.S. teachers are white (NCES, 2020).

Scholars Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings challenge educators to consider how students who have been disenfranchised and marginalized in education can retain their cultural identities and perspectives within an institution that was never built with them in mind. "Teaching is a contextual and situational process," Gay explains. "As such, it is most effective when ecological factors, such as prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities of teachers and students, are included in its implementation" (Gay, 2000, p. 21). Ladson-Billings asserts that teachers who practice culturally relevant methods are those who believe "knowledge is continually recreated, recycled, and shared by teachers and students alike. They view the content of the curriculum critically and are passionate about it" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p.28). These scholars offer much for educators to reflect on as they work to circumvent learning loss teaching approaches like over-testing, over-representation in special education, and remedial classes that further disenfranchise Black and Brown students.

From the rich body of research on CRRST, the following four critical actions can help educators develop curriculum and teach in ways that lean away from a learning loss mindset and toward a liberatory mindset.

### ***1. Self-reflect on personal and professional beliefs and actions.***

When operating from a learning loss mindset, there can be a propensity to rush to action. Giving in to this urge can result in actions that are not constructive, such as investing in packaged programs that seem like viable solutions to addressing the academic needs of students. But education initiatives that prioritize top-down standardized approaches designed to address disparities in academic performance often ignore how systemic racism shapes the experiences of students of color (Knaus & Rogers-Ard, 2012). Ultimately, such actions are a reflection of beliefs about children and the purpose of education. The true work of educators begins with examining ourselves and our practices. "As educators, we first require a deep understanding of how we have been shaped by policies and perspectives and how those same policies and perspectives impact the lives of our students and our practices" (Parker, 2022, p. 21). Educators can recognize how their backgrounds and experiences shape their actions and beliefs and ask questions such as:

- Who am I? What is the more racially conscious response that addresses this?
- In what ways does my not truly knowing the racial and cultural identities of students impact their learning?
- How have I sought to intentionally build a diverse racial community in my life?
- In what ways am I working to create a more fluid power dynamic between myself and my students?

When educators engage in ongoing self-reflection before, during, and after they teach a lesson, they are better positioned to recognize dominant, normalized, and exclusionary practices; disrupt them; and embrace multiple forms of knowing.

### ***2. Be attuned to the interests, values, and concerns of the community.***

Learning about a community takes time, particularly if educators do not live where they work. This involves rejecting any stereotypical representations and working to understand the complex, dynamic nature of communities.

Educators can take learning walks through surrounding neighborhoods with the intention of noticing the beauty and creativity that resides within them. Eat at local restaurants and notice the businesses that are important to neighborhoods. Examine murals and other public artwork, which can provide insight into the history, challenges, and triumphs of communities. Connect with local activists and read local newspapers to learn about what's important to the community. Talk to elders who have lived in the community for decades, parent association members, and paraprofessionals.

Teachers and leaders can reflect with questions such as:

- How does having an outsider perspective about a community that is not my own limit my work as a teacher? As a leader?
- How does learning from insider perspectives about the community and the experiences of the people who live there inform my teaching? My leadership?
- In what ways can I take an anthropologically and ethnographically informed stance to teach curriculum in ways that are a closer fit between students' home and school cultures?

The process of knowing a community requires not just time, but also trust.

### ***3. Avoid culture- and color-evasive practices.***

Educators cannot engage students if they don't truly know them. And educators cannot truly know students if they operate from a culture- or color-evasive ideology that denies the significance of race and ethnicity (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017). Avoid generic teaching practices that erase students' identities and lived experiences. Instead, consider:

- What knowledge do my students bring to the classroom, and how can I use this as a bridge to strengthening and acquiring new academic skills?
- What topics are students excited about? What issues feel most urgent to them? How can I leverage this urgency and excitement to engage students in learning and address standards?
- How do I demonstrate vulnerability and humility about that which I do not know, but my students do?

For example, use the popularity of comic books or movies such as Black Panther to connect these fictional stories to actual African kingdoms and histories through which students learn about social, economic, and political conditions of various civilizations. Teach about how the game Double Dutch highlights Black innovativeness and ingenuity, particularly that of Black girls who continue to elevate this jump rope artistry into a competitive sport. Likewise, an exploration of Latin Dance can enable children to learn about the cultural, linguistic, musical, and historical heritage of Latin Americans and afford opportunities for a broader and more inclusive understanding of the African diaspora in Latin America. Encourage high school students intrigued by the movie *Nope* to explore the hidden history of African American cowboys.

To avoid culture- and color-evasive approaches, educators Samy Alim and Django Paris (2017) urge fellow teachers to recognize what is important to sustain, to preserve and fortify students' racial and cultural identities.

### ***4. Maintain high expectations for all students.***

Ladson-Billings (2009) discusses high expectations as a central tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy, but she did not simply mean arbitrary notions of "rigor" or being harsh and overly demanding. Part of having high expectations, she says, is "digging knowledge out of students" (p. 56). From this perspective, educators must believe that students are brilliant, and their role is to unearth students'

potential. It is only by recognizing students' knowledge and talents that educators can then build upon them.

Students want to be challenged, and they need to know that their teachers believe in their abilities. As Ladson-Billings says, teaching is a reciprocal process. Educators listen and learn from students to "rethink and reenvision" the curriculum with high expectations that enable all students to thrive. Part of the rethinking and envisioning with high expectations includes considering questions about curriculum and teaching such as:

- What opportunities have I provided for multiple ways of knowing?
- What opportunities have I provided for students to engage multiple modalities as learners?
- What opportunities have I created for students to express their goals for their own learning?
- What opportunities have I created for students to lead and for me to learn?

Avoid distributing mundane worksheets, skill-and-drill activities, and one-size-fits-all, rinse-and-repeat curricula. With a liberatory mindset, addressing standards involves recognizing the knowledge, skills, and brilliance of students; affirming them; and connecting this to learning experiences that help them acquire new knowledge and skills.

## Time for a New Narrative

In striving to be an antiracist educator with a liberatory mindset, Yvonne reframed her curriculum to directly confront issues that impact her students' daily lives. It is also critical for educators to reframe how they speak about children and their academic abilities—to stop discussing students in terms of what they've "lost" or what is "missing." Such reframing has the potential to dismantle the process of avoidance that the learning loss narrative affords and reckon with education's failure to create learning experiences that keep Black and Brown children in mind.

What will it take for educators to reframe learning loss teaching approaches and make a paradigm shift to meaningful instructional engagement with justice and liberation at the core? It will involve constructing a new narrative about the purpose and function of education.

It calls for each of us to be more like Yvonne, who declared, "I can do more with this" when reflecting on curriculum and teaching. And to believe that not only can we do more, but so can the children we serve.

## Reflect & Discuss

- ➔ What are the dangers of placing too much emphasis on learning loss?
- ➔ What does a liberatory mindset mean to you?
- ➔ How can you "do more" with the curriculum you have to make it culturally relevant to your students?