



Book Review

Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy

Gholdy Muhammad. (2020). Scholastic. ISBN 9781338594898 (paper/e-book) CDN\$33.01; 176 pages.

ALISON CANARAS
University of Georgia, USA

Cultivating Genius introduces a new educational framework, one that is “written by people of color and designed *for* children of color” (p. 11, emphasis added). Muhammad coins this framework as Historically Responsive Literacy, or HRL. Historically Responsive Literacy is sensitive to and appreciative of Black history, rejects watered-down skills-based scripted curriculums and re-centers student voice and literacy as an act of power while also fostering a space of love, resistance, deep intellect, and criticality. When practiced, Muhammad’s HRL is likely to positively reshape and reframe entire educational experiences for Black and Brown students and educators.

The book opens with a foreword by Bettina Love, advocate and author on behalf of abolitionist teaching practices, who compares Muhammad’s work to that of resisters like Ella Baker and Angela Davis, amongst others (p. 7). Love rightfully describes *Cultivating Genius* as a significant contribution in the struggle and solidarity for justice. To me, the genius of this book lies in the way Muhammad finds the illusive sweet spot between offering guidance to teachers and avoiding scripted, teacher-proof curricula. Muhammad’s authorship mirrors what she urges teachers to provide students, as she creates a space for professional growth that simultaneously allows teachers to reexamine their practices through a critical lens and gives them the skills to rebuild their learning spaces in their own, creative fashion. Teachers are left with both a scathing critique of a system that prioritizes standardized testing and corporate interest, as well as the tools to resist that system and uplift students.

Correspondence Address: Alison Canaras, Mary Frances Early College of Education, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA; Email: alison.canaras@uga.edu

ISSN: 1911-4788



In the first section of the book, Muhammad provides readers with some of the historical context that informs HRL. Here, she points out that during a time when reading and writing was illegal for many Black people in the United States, members of Black literacy societies of the 19th century, such as “Reading Room for Men of Color,” risked their lives both to be heard and to affect change. Muhammad calls on educators to return this historically rooted power of literary presence to students. She then builds upon that history to suggest teachers make space in schools for students to have similar experiences of sharing their literacies with one another, a practice that Black literacy societies cultivated so well (p. 28). Muhammad’s proposal of student literacy as an artful performance, a tool for resistance, and a means for students to have their voices genuinely heard, is also a call to re-center students’ power in classrooms. This suggestion promotes schools as more equitable spaces for Black and Brown students, and draws upon the important histories to which those students are connected and from which we all can learn.

Throughout this first section, Muhammad acknowledges that this understanding of literacy as resistance and power is not something that she or any other contemporary educator is inventing anew. On the contrary, she maintains that the best educators are those who learn and build from historical and cultural contexts and examples, including and not limited to the group of Black high school students who published demands for better conditions in schools in 1969, and the Black elementary school students who were arrested for protesting segregation in 1963 (pp. 43-46). Here, Muhammad celebrates the prioritization and power of intellectual collectivism practiced in Black literacy societies and beyond, and criticizes its sharp contrast to what she deems as the more contemporary state of individualist, capitalist-driven classrooms premised on “keep[ing] education to one’s self” (p. 26). In this first section Muhammad also points to some concrete tactics that educators can use to explicitly celebrate students’ histories, such as having students write autobiographies or interview family members of students with different cultural backgrounds to be shared within the class (p. 52); these tactics are developed more fully later in the book,

In the book’s second section, Muhammad outlines the components of the HRL framework, which are focused on cultivating identity, skills, intellect, and criticality. In developing identity, Muhammad argues that students deserve “opportunities in school to explore multiple facets of selfhood, but also to learn about the identities of others who may differ” (p. 67). In terms of cultivating skills, Muhammad recommends authentic, meaningful texts for educators as they teach explicit reading skills, rather than solely focusing on leveled texts, which reduce students’ academic identities down to an assigned skill level (p. 95). She exemplifies this by offering various writing rubrics that may be used, which evaluate writing skills without enforcing formulaic, restrictive writing guidelines (pp. 92-94). In cultivating the last two components of HRL, intellect and criticality, Muhammad suggests engaging

students in topics related to their worlds, including but not limited to “politics, human rights and justice, economics, sociology, and business” (p. 102). In this way, students’ formulation of understanding and engagement with relevant, authentic topics allows them to take charge of their own meaning-making and to use their literacy as a means of power. Muhammad argues that this makes for a more compassionate, human approach to literacy education (p. 117).

In the third and final section of *Cultivating Genius*, Muhammad synthesizes guidelines for how to implement HRL into classrooms, offering lesson suggestions and guidance for how to select, connect, and layer various texts to make them meaningful, historically responsive backdrops to any unit. In this way, teachers can utilize meaningful literacy, and students will be exposed to intellectually engaging works that make direct connections to their lives. Muhammad suggests teaching a myriad of meaningful texts to accomplish this, such as laws, news articles, resistance writings, photography, and Black newspapers. Doing so, she argues, will help to challenge and cultivate students’ identity, skills, intellect, and critical capacities. In each of these lesson frameworks, as well as in the succinct interdisciplinary unit plan examples provided, Muhammad provides explicit, applicable, and compelling advice and strategies for teachers to try, without scripting entire day-to-day unit and lesson plans for them to follow aimlessly. In this way, Muhammad distinguishes herself as a leader in curriculum and instructional design.

There is no universal, step-by-step guide to creating equitable and just classroom spaces. However, Muhammad is clear that when texts are carefully and critically selected by teachers who are committed to practicing HRL, the avenues and possibilities for teaching and learning are limitless. She also is clear that while teachers are educated professionals and experts in their fields, we are surely not the only sources of knowledge and creation in classrooms. Following this logic, Muhammad consistently centers students in her HRL guidelines, reframing literacy instruction as one of love, power, and resistance, rooted in Black history, and providing a theoretical framework that just might be the connection many teachers and students need between anti-racist pedagogical theory and practice.

For teachers, Muhammad’s framework is clear, digestible, and gives explicit guidance, all while allowing endless room for creativity and innovation in curriculum design. For students, Historically Responsive Literacy might be one of the most effective entry points at bridging the gap between theory and their everyday lives. In other words, the HRL framework put forth in *Cultivating Genius* provides a transformative view of education, one which can be applied immediately in ways that allow for room – not large gaps – in interpretation and reinvention by teachers and learners alike.