



Black Lives Matter at School and Social Studies Education: Paying Down the Educational Debt Owed to Black People

Denisha Jones

Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York, USA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Denisha Jones

I am the Executive Director of Defending the Early Years, and I live in New York. I also teach part-time in the Art of Teaching program at Sarah Lawrence College and the School of Education at Howard University. My ultimate goal is to devise policies and programs that nurture young children's innate curiosity and drive for learning in a space where they are free to develop and grow, and educators are free to teach. I study how curriculum and pedagogy can promote education as liberation through play and other emancipatory approaches to teaching and learning. I also emphasize the importance of positive racial, ethnic, and cultural identity development in the early years. My personal life recently underwent major changes as I am now parenting two teenagers from Colombia. I love to travel, read, write, and camp with friends. In June of 2023, I plan on visiting France, Scotland, and Amsterdam! Before spending the last 18 years preparing future teachers in different universities, I was a kindergarten teacher in DC, a preschool teacher in Indiana, and a preschool director in California.



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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to teach for Black lives when state governments are passing laws that prevent teachers from discussing race and gender and a vocal minority of parents are attacking school board meetings insisting on a return to book banning and other educational

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gag orders to stop the Critical Race Theory (CRT) boogeyman (Johnson, 2022; Ockerman, 2021)? How can public education pay down the educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) owed to Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and their families when elected officials are prioritizing protecting whiteness at their expense? What role can social studies educators play in reducing the debt and promoting educational justice for racialized students? Despite the attacks, educators have a responsibility to use their privilege and power to challenge those who use education as a weapon against the marginalized and oppressed (Royal, 2022). The Black Lives Matter at School (BLMAS) movement is offered as a space for public education in general, and social studies educators in particular, to enact what it means to teach for Black lives and pay down the debt.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that instead of focusing on a so-called “achievement-gap” we should focus our efforts on the education debt owed to BIPOC children. She compared the obsession with gaps in achievement with only focusing on the nation’s deficit, which can disappear during a time of a balanced budget. The national debt is an accumulation of all the previous deficits and will grow even when the budget is balanced. Thus, she asserts that a focus on gaps in achievement is misleading and instead presents the idea of an education debt, constructed from the historical, sociopolitical, economic, and moral policies that produce the racial and class gaps in achievement. A full review of each aspect of the education debt is beyond the scope of this article, so the focus will be on the historical debt and social studies education.

THE RESEARCH

L.G. King (2014) examined the work of Black educators who authored Black history textbooks in the late 19th and early 20th century as an alternative to the social studies textbooks by white educators that denied citizenship to Black people. He notes, “It was common in these textbooks to underscore Black persons as inferior and second-class citizens...The racializations of Blackness were used as justifications for the paternalistic attitudes White citizens had towards African Americans” (L. J. King, 2014, p. 2). As the purveyor of ideologies regarding citizenship, the mainstream social studies textbooks presented whiteness as the standard for citizenship and stripped Blackness of its humanity. Thus, the field of social studies contributed to the historical educational debt extracted from Black lives. And despite the work of Black educators to counter this narrative through the creation of culturally relevant Black history textbooks, the field of social studies education has yet to embrace a pedagogy or curriculum that centers Black lives and fosters Black citizenship.

J. E. King (2004) defined cultural knowledge as “the learned behaviors, beliefs, and ways of relating to people and the environment that members of a cultural group acquire through normal processes of enculturation” (p. 356). She notes how the American school curriculum is steeped in European American cultural knowledge that legitimizes white middle-class cultural dominance while fields such as Black history have worked to validate Black cultural knowledge and autonomy. Curriculum is transformed by adherence to culture-centered knowledge, but that transformation depends on where the culture-centered knowl-

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edge is situated on the spectrum. J.E. King (2004) differentiated marginalizing and invisibilizing knowledge on the end connected with sameness and hegemony from expanding and deciphering knowledge on the other end linked to difference and autonomy. Social studies education was traditionally steeped in invisibilizing knowledge, ignoring or downplaying the contributions of African Americans to this country's development, and has gradually moved to marginalizing knowledge through the selective inclusion of Black individuals palatable to the white dominant narrative without challenging it. To pay down the debt, social studies education in general and citizenship education, in particular, must embrace Black cultural expanding knowledge that includes diverse narratives from diverse communities and deciphering knowledge that demands autonomy from the constraints of other socially constructed belief systems.

Teaching for Black lives requires a curriculum and pedagogy that humanizes Black people in history and the present. For social studies educators, teaching for Black lives must include teaching history that disrupts the traditional narratives of enslavement, civil rights, and individual Black achievements that often reinforce messages of Black inferiority and respectability politics. A curriculum for Black lives requires contemporary Black cultural knowledge as a form of emancipatory pedagogy (Gordon, 1985) needed to undo the historical indoctrination that contributed to the education debt. A pedagogy for Black lives strives for Black liberation through collective social action with a commitment to centering Black joy. Social studies educators are invited to engage in the BLMAS movement as a pedagogy and curriculum for Black lives.

As the #BlackLivesMatter movement grew with national calls for racial justice, BLMAS brought the fight to the schoolhouse and evolved from a day of solidarity to a Week of Action, to a Year of Purpose. The BLMAS movement highlights 13 guiding principles (13Gps) (see Figure 1) from the national #BlackLivesMatter movement, advocates four national demands (see Figure 2) to pay down the education debt and asks "educators to reflect on their own work in relationship, to antiracist pedagogy, and abolitionist practice, persistently challenging themselves to center Black lives in their classrooms" ((Jones & Hagopian, 2020), p. 209). Each year a national team of volunteers curates K-12 curriculum resources aligned with the 13GPS, and local organizers host curriculum fairs to orient teachers to the materials. The Week of Action, conceived by educators in Philadelphia after hearing about the one-day teach-ins in Seattle, organizes events related to the demands and the various 13GPS spread throughout the week. Beginning in 2020, the BLMAS National Steering Committee enacted the Year of Purpose framework that would begin in September and end in June. This ensured that the work of BLMAS would happen throughout the year, while local organizers could still plan a Week of Action during the first week of February.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Although the BLMAS curriculum does not belong to any one content area, it has a natural connection to social studies and citizenship education. Mathews and Jones (2022) explored how the 13GPS can serve as contemporary Black cultural knowledge to facilitate Black cul-



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BLACK LIVES MATTER GUIDING PRINCIPLES

<https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/what-we-believe/>

PRINCIPLE	DESCRIPTION
RESTORATIVE JUSTICE	We intentionally build and nurture a beloved community that is bonded together through a beautiful struggle that is restorative, not depleting.
DIVERSITY	We acknowledge, respect, and celebrate differences and commonalities.
EMPATHY	We practice empathy. We engage comrades with the intent to learn about and connect with their contexts.
LOVING ENGAGEMENT	We embody and practice justice, liberation, and peace in our engagements with one another
QUEER AFFIRMING	We foster a queer-affirming network. When we gather, we do so with the intention of freeing ourselves from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking, or rather, the belief that all in the world are heterosexual (unless s/he or they disclose otherwise).
TRANSGENDER AFFIRMING	We are self-reflexive and do the work required to dismantle cisgender privilege and uplift Black trans folk, especially Black trans women who continue to be disproportionately impacted by trans-antagonistic violence. We make space for transgender brothers and sisters to participate and lead.
UNAPOLOGETICALLY BLACK	We are unapologetically Black in our positioning. In affirming that Black Lives Matter, we need not qualify our position. To love and desire freedom and justice for ourselves is a prerequisite for wanting the same for others.
BLACK WOMEN	We build a space that affirms Black women and is free from sexism, misogyny, and environments in which men are centered.
BLACK FAMILIES	We make our spaces family-friendly and enable parents to fully participate with their children. We dismantle the patriarchal practice that requires mothers to work "double shifts" so that they can mother in private even as they participate in public justice work.
BLACK VILLAGES	We disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement by supporting each other as extended families and "villages" that collectively care for one another, especially our children, to the degree that mothers, parents, and children are comfortable.
GLOBALISM	We see ourselves as part of the global Black family, and we are aware of the different ways we are impacted or privileged as Black people who exist in different parts of the world.
INTERGENERATIONAL	We cultivate an intergenerational and communal network free from ageism. We believe that all people, regardless of age, show up with the capacity to lead and learn.
COLLECTIVE VALUE	We are guided by the fact that all Black lives matter, regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, ability, disability, religious beliefs or disbeliefs, immigration status, or location.

Figure 1 Figure 1 13GPS Poster

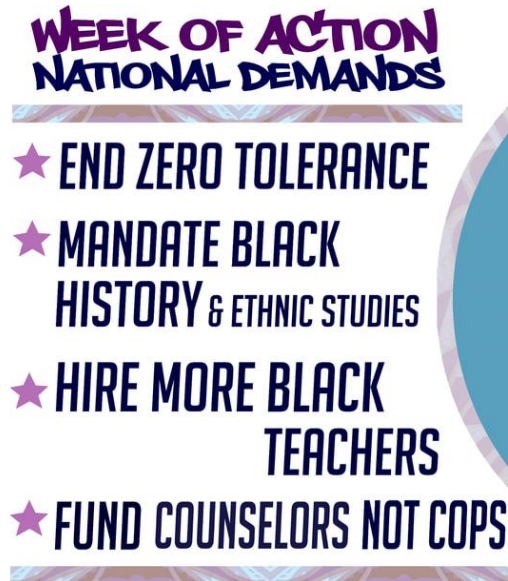


Figure 2 Figure 2 BLMAS Demands Poster by Caryn Davidson

tural citizenship education. Though most of the research on cultural citizenship focuses on Latinx and Asian Americans, they document how the “BLMAS curriculum provides the opportunity for schools to teach Black cultural knowledge, a Black history that centers resistance as foundational to Black struggle, and a curriculum affirming Black humanity” (Mathews and Jones, 2022, p. 4). Their qualitative narrative inquiry of seven teachers who participated in multiple BLMAS Week of Actions identified the following aspects of Black cultural citizenship education: talking to young children about big ideas so they can see themselves and others as change agents (Jones & Mathews, 2023), supporting student in unlearning and relearning Black history, centering students as active contributors in the current movement for Black liberation, providing opportunities for students to recognize and challenge systems of oppression in the present and the future (Mathews & Jones, 2022); and reframing critical civic praxis centered on Black experiences (Jones & Mathews, in press).

Even though none of the teachers in their study taught social studies, their research demonstrates how social studies educators can use the BLMAS curriculum and pedagogy as a tool for teaching for Black lives. Social studies scholars have documented how the field historically added to the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2003) and kept citizenship separate from Blackness (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021; Woodson, 2019). Other scholars have studied the work of contemporary Black social studies educators who confront the education debt by creating “imagined communities in their classrooms as a site of citizenship” (Vickery, 2017, p. 332) or accepting their responsibility as citizens to support their students in resisting white supremacy (Duncan, 2020). Social studies teachers and scholars are invited to embrace the BLMAS movement and accept their responsibility in paying down the debt through a commitment to center Black liberation in their curriculum and pedagogy.

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Q&A WITH DENISHA JONES

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

Many teachers understand it is necessary to center the Black perspective since the Eurocentric perspective has been privileged in our schools and curriculum. As a White and new teacher, how would you suggest introducing Black knowledge into the classroom in an effective and authentic way?

Denisha Jones's Response:

I would suggest that white teachers, strive to change the narrative of Black knowledge from pain, struggle, and inferiority to joy, resistance, and collective efforts for liberation. Too often, well-meaning white teachers believe that to teach Black history means to teach the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and that is not our history. That is world history. Black history cannot begin with the atrocities committed against Black people. This starting point ensures that Blackness will always be seen as a deficit. I ask my pre-service teachers what does it mean to teach for Black joy, and when most of them can't answer that question, I suggest they investigate what that means. To my knowledge, young Jewish children aren't taught about the Holocaust as an introduction to who they are as people, so why do we think that it is appropriate for children's introduction to Black culture should begin with enslavement? You must unlearn invisibilizing and marginalizing knowledge and replace it with expanding and deciphering knowledge.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

To what extent do you envision BLM at school as a way of paying off the "educational debt" as primarily a pedagogical possibility that happens through curriculum enactment versus a more foundational and fundamental approach to the existential nature of educational spaces? I do not want to misconstrue these questions solely within a binary but as a means of prioritization.

Denisha Jones's Response:

I see BLMAS as a movement that pays down the debt through national demands. As we work to eliminate punitive discipline, hire more Black teachers, mandate Black and Ethnic studies, and ensure every child goes to school with counselors instead of cops, we pay down the debt at the macro level. However, teachers can pay down the debt on a micro level by teaching the 13GPS and enacting the Week of Action and Year of Purpose in their classrooms. Even if our demands are never realized, the debt can be addressed at the individual level, and I believe that both are needed simultaneously.

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Question #3

Teacher's Question:

How can teacher education programs do more to support future educators in disrupting the narrative within the curriculum and schools toward paying down the educational debt you describe?

Denisha Jones's Response:

Teacher education programs must accept the responsibility of exposing the relationship between American education and colonization. Since the founding of this country, education has been used to further the American colonization project against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. In order to pay down the debt, teachers must recognize how the curriculum, pedagogy, and policies work to maintain American colonization. Once they expose their students to this expanding knowledge, teacher education programs can also document how cultural groups have fought against American colonization. Teachers need the historical knowledge of what education has done and the possibilities of what education can be.

Question #4

Teacher's Question:

Altering how we center Black lives is one step individual teachers can take in my classroom. But how can individual teachers effectively identify and address classroom and school-wide policies that hurt or impact our minority students more than they help?

Denisha Jones's Response:

Teachers must speak out about these policies. It's important that they revise their own classroom practices to abandon punitive discipline, but they must also speak to their colleagues and administration about the need to make these changes school-wide. Teachers must also invite parents to understand their approaches to education that seek support from all students and welcome them as partners. Parents might not understand why a teacher is taking a certain approach, but with continued reassurance that the teacher has their child's best interest at heart and believes that a more justice-oriented approach serves all children well, they can model how to live and work their values.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

How does re-authoring the script on Black Life that is untold in the social studies curriculum serve to repay these historical debts, and how do you envision we would recognize when it had been repaid?



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Denisha Jones's Response:

I don't believe the debt can ever be repaid in the sense that we can stop making Black Lives Matter in school. We pay down the debt when we center Black joy, affirm Black life, and provide counternarratives that center the ongoing collective struggle for Black liberation. But this is a debt that must be paid every year. Even if all our demands were met, we would still need to assert that Black lives matter. If Black people were granted reparations today, Black Lives Matter would not disappear. Paying down the debt doesn't take away how the debt was created. Social studies education contributed to this debt, and by embracing the BLMAS pedagogy, it can pay down the debt without expecting that the work will one day end.

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