



Introduction to the Teaching for Black Lives Themed Issue

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am an Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina. My ultimate goal as a researcher and teacher educator is to help classrooms become equitable and emancipatory spaces for all students, which is why my research encourages us to learn from Black teachers, their perspectives, and the ways they discuss race with Black students. My own professional development efforts have been focused on learning from Black feminists and how Black feminist perspectives and pedagogies benefit all students and be incorporated in classrooms. Outside of my professional pursuits, I like to attend concerts, travel, and watch Georgia football (Go Dawgs!). Before joining the university, I taught middle school social studies for 3 years, and I also served as an elementary instructional coach for 3 years, both in Georgia. You can find me on Twitter (@drkristenduncan) and at my website, www.kristenduncan.com.



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INTRODUCTION

In July 2013, Alicia Garza wrote a love letter to Black people on her Facebook page proclaiming that Black lives matter following George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Her friend and fellow organizer Patrisse Cullors then added a hashtag and posted #BlackLivesMatter to her own social media accounts [Politico \(2021\)](#). From there, the hashtag has grown into a global protest movement that seeks to affirm Black

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life and end violence towards Black bodies at the hands of the state and vigilantes (Matter, n.d.).

In the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement became what is possibly the largest protest movement in the history of the nation (Buchanan et al., 2020). As the world shut down due to Covid-19, those who had not been paying attention had no opportunity to look away as the violence the state inflicts on Black bodies was displayed on screens all over the globe. Many Americans were forced to come face-to-face with this understanding for the first time, and a renewed (or perhaps first-time) interest was sparked in teaching and learning Black histories, revisiting discipline policies that perpetuated racial disparities, and incorporating anti-racist curriculum in K-12 schools. Swiftly thereafter, however, there was a backlash and states began to pass laws forbidding teachers from engaging their students in discussions of racism (Stout & Wilburn, 2022), with the Florida Department of Education going so far as to ban the teaching of an AP African American Studies course (FDOE, 2023).

It is in this context that this special issue was birthed. While race and racism have always been critical issues in the United States, recent years have brought race and racism back to the forefront of the American consciousness, with an alluring facade of racial progress and a very real backlash taking hold so quickly it could have given someone whiplash. In one minute, teachers were looking for ways to rid their curriculum of anti-Blackness, and the next, they found themselves facing possible prosecution for teaching the truth about the anti-Black past and present of the United States.

The Black Lives Matter movement has helped put a national spotlight on the ways Black children are (primarily are not) affirmed in schools and the ways they experience violence from the state in classrooms. Unfortunately, Black children often find themselves on the receiving end of curricular, disciplinary, and even physical violence in school—a place where they are legally mandated to be. Given that it is Black Americans—newly freed Black Americans—who advocated for the public education system as we know it today (Anderson, 1988), ways Black children experience public schools in the U.S. becomes an even bigger issue. The question then becomes: How do we teach for Black lives? Better yet, how do we teach to support, affirm, and care for Black life?

TEACHING FOR BLACK LIVES

The idea of education being instrumental to Black life is certainly not a novel idea. Historically, scholars and teachers like W.E.B DuBois, Anna Julia Cooper, George Ellis, Carter G. Woodson, and Nannie Helen Burroughs have all advocated for Black students to receive an education tailored to their specific needs as a group. While they knew that Black students were and are not a monolith, they also understood that Black students needed an education that was tailored to suit their needs, given the distinct role anti-Black racism played in the group's history and contemporary realities. While they varied in their opinions on the value of industrial education for Black students, each of these scholars and educators knew that Black students needed to learn Black histories, develop a critical consciousness, and have teachers who had high expectations of them (Cooper, 1930; DuBois, 1936; Ellis,

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1917; Murray & Woyshner, 2017; Woodson, 1933) (Cooper, 1998; Ellis, 1917; Murray & Woyshner, 2017; Woodson, 1933). As DuBois (1935) explained, Black students needed the opportunity to “study intelligently and from their own point of view, the slave trade, slavery, emancipation, Reconstruction, and present economic development” (p. 333).

Although these scholars and educators advocated for Black students in the Jim Crow era, Black scholars and educators have continued to work towards Black students receiving an equitable education in the decades since the *Brown v. Board* rendered legally mandated school segregation unconstitutional. Like their predecessors, these scholars wanted Black students have access to curriculum where they could see themselves and learn in classrooms where they could be affirmed (Assante, 1991; Gordon, 1985; Hilliard, 1978), and Black teachers often provided this, even when it was not included in the prescribed curriculum (Foster, 1997).

I will not spend my time here dwelling on the numerous inequities that Black students face in schools. I will, however, note that contemporary scholars and teachers continue to work towards providing Black students with the affirming, equitable, and emancipatory education they deserve. Scholars continue to analyze curriculum and curricular materials (Brown & Brown, 2010; Jones, 2022; Seeger et al., 2022) and put forth various conceptualizations of teaching suited to fit Black students’ needs (Gay, 2000; King, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012), while Black teachers continue doing what they have done for centuries: using everything at their disposal to provide Black students with both content knowledge and an understanding of how to navigate various systems of racism (Castro, 2022; Lynn & Jennings, 2009; Thomas, 2022).

ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

The articles in this issue continue to build on this legacy of conceptualizing the kind of education that will meet the needs of Black students. As we find ourselves in an historical moment where states are passing legislation that makes discussions about race illegal, scholars and teachers must continue to find new ways to resist evolving forms of oppression and work toward providing Black students with an education that affirms and sustains them—the education they deserve. Denisha Jones addresses this issue head-on, as she discusses the ways the Black Lives Matter at School curriculum can be used as a tool to pay down the educational debt that the United States owes to its Black citizens. Chris Busey expands our understanding of what it means to teach for Black life, helping us see the importance of teaching for and about Black life across the globe, including in Latin America and the Caribbean. Tianna Dowie-Chin builds on the notion of studying the Black diaspora, discussing the diversity amongst the Black diaspora in Canada and how it is largely absent from Canadian curricula. Finally, LaGarrett King’s piece reminds us that teaching Black history as it currently exists in curricula is not sufficient to affirm and sustain Black life. We must teach Black history in ways that help students understand the full range of the Black experience as well as the role systemic power has played and continues to play in the oppression of Black people.



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This collection of articles provides an excellent starting point for teachers who are interested in beginning or evolving their teaching in ways that affirm and sustain Black life. My hope, along with each of these authors, is that readers will use these articles as just that—a starting point to turn classrooms places where Black students feel embraced and are able to thrive, as this is just the beginning of teaching for Black lives.

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