TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE IN UC DAVIS EDUCATION CENTER

WORKING PAPER

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to outline how a transformative justice approach can be used to improve the professional development of Black teachers. Situating the current state of the Black teaching force in the United State as a manifestation of continued harm toward Black people who seek to use education for liberation, the author suggests that this harm be formally addressed through strategic work with Black teachers and the institutions they work in. This paper offers examples of how one national professional development organization is engaging in such a process.

The Importance and Use of a Transformative Justice Approach in Professional Development for Black Teachers
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> "I'm able to take all these crazy ideas and actually make them into something that heals peoples that may spark vision in people. That shows them to dream big, that shows them that they are limitless." Beyoncé, "Homecoming," 2019

In 1995 I began my career as a high school social studies teacher. Within a few years I found myself burnt out and looking to graduate studies to help guide my understanding of how I could be an effective teacher in an urban school. My time in graduate school helped deepen my analysis of the structural inequities that impact so many Black teachers' decisions to leave the classroom. I had gained a new intellectual understanding of these patterns and my place within these ongoing dynamics, but was still left with the feeling that I had failed my people by not figuring out how to utilize a position of influence to help more Black students and families experience academic success.

Harm to Black Teachers

Black people have always grappled with a punitive element to our education in the United States. Slave codes prohibiting the education of Black people prior to the 20th century reflected widespread fear that access to knowledge would result in rebellion and challenge the historic power structure. These were not idle concerns. Literate individuals could, of course, begin to disrupt entrenched systems of control as they acquired the skills to forge the documents required

for them to travel, or read for themselves the entirety of the teachings of the Bible. Indeed, many enslaved Africans achieved their freedom through travel document forgery, and false narratives that chattel slavery and White supremacy were justified in and by Christian scripture were easily delegitimized in Black literate circles. Blacks caught teaching or learning reading or writing were thus severely punished and, in some cases, killed (Banks, 1996).

The violence associated with gaining an education and living a liberated life did not end when slavery was outlawed. While Black people were permitted to teach and learn in schools throughout the country during the Jim Crow era, which began in the 1860s, many schools were still monitored and controlled by White men and Black public schools received far fewer resources than White public schools (Siddle Walker, 1996). Even in very challenging conditions, though, many Black teachers found ways to create traditions of excellence and demonstrate the academic potential and academic achievements of Black learners (Foster, 1997; Siddle Walker, 2000, 2001).

An important profession in the Black community, teaching was recognized and respected as a significant leadership role, particularly for Black women (Irvine & Hill, 1990). The importance of teaching in and to Black communities, however, only heightened the possibility of violence for those involved. One of the most extreme cases of tangible harm arose in Greenwood, Oklahoma, where by 1921 descendants of enslaved Africans had formed a community of 100,000 Black people who established thriving businesses and a nationally recognized school system (Brown, 2018). Extremely attuned to the power of education as a pathway to resistance, residents unified to resist the racist structures and behaviors common in Tulsa and came together to create their own economically self-sustaining Black community. Three hundred were massacred over a three-day period in 1921, as a result (Ogletree Jr., 2004). This terrifying punishment for academic, social, and economic success offered a cautionary tale for Black people throughout the country, particularly teachers working in racial affinity to create systemic change (Messer, Shriver, & Adams, 2018).

While the laws eventually changed, the sentiment did not. The first half of the 20th century continued to be characterized by systemic inequities that resulted in very, very few Black people receiving the structural and financial resources of their White counterparts. Educating Black children in a segregated country was unjust and challenging, but not impossible. The community had to take responsibility for individual students and for the whole structure. Separate did not inherently mean inferior. While the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision is often looked at as a decision that "saved" Linda Brown from having to attend an inferior school, her mother spoke eloquently about fighting in the courts for the ability to send her child to the best school – which in her mind was the Black school. She wanted Linda to be in an all-Black school, she just wanted the power to choose (Gladwell, 2017). Over time, the narrative that being schooled with only Black people was segregation that was inherently unequal (Thurgood

Marshall's winning argument for the case) came to be understood without nuance or context by the public at large as a statement that all-Black schooling was a guaranteed pathway to ignorance, based on implicit logic that all-Black equaled inferior. Such notions were in direct conflict with the lived experience of many Black communities, however, and this perception harmed many people's self-identity and self-worth, as well as community potential.

Perhaps the gravest harm that resulted from the *Brown* ruling was the destruction of the Black teaching force in the United States. Hudson and Holmes (1994) describe this outcome:

> In 1954, the year of the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, approximately 82,000 African American teachers were responsible for the education of the nation's two million African American public school students. A decade later, over 38,000 Black teachers and administrators had lost their positions in 17 Southern and border states. Between 1975 and 1985, the number of students majoring in education declined by 66% and another 21,515 Black teachers lost their jobs between 1984 and 1989. (p. 388)

Generations of Black students lost the opportunity to be taught by Black teachers who looked for and honored their intelligence and actively resisted the mainstream deficit narratives of the dominant society. These outcomes were also harmful to generations of non-Black students. In the 21st century these cycles of harm began to be reframed into discussions about the importance of teacher diversity. Albert Shanker Institute (2015) has pointed out, "While there is reason to believe that Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students would be the greatest beneficiaries of a diverse teaching force, there is evidence that all students—and our democracy at large—would benefit from a teaching force that reflects the full diversity of the U.S. population."

While numerous benefits are likely to accrue from the establishment of a diverse teaching force, the harm of historic and contemporary structural and physical violence must be also addressed on the systemic and personal levels for system-wide and personal change and healing to occur. The impact of internalized oppression and associated cycles and patterns of transferred oppression experiences affected Black students and Black teachers before, during, and after the Jim Crow era, and need to be formally and actively addressed. Such work can occur through transformative approaches to teacher support grounded in the principles of transformative justice.

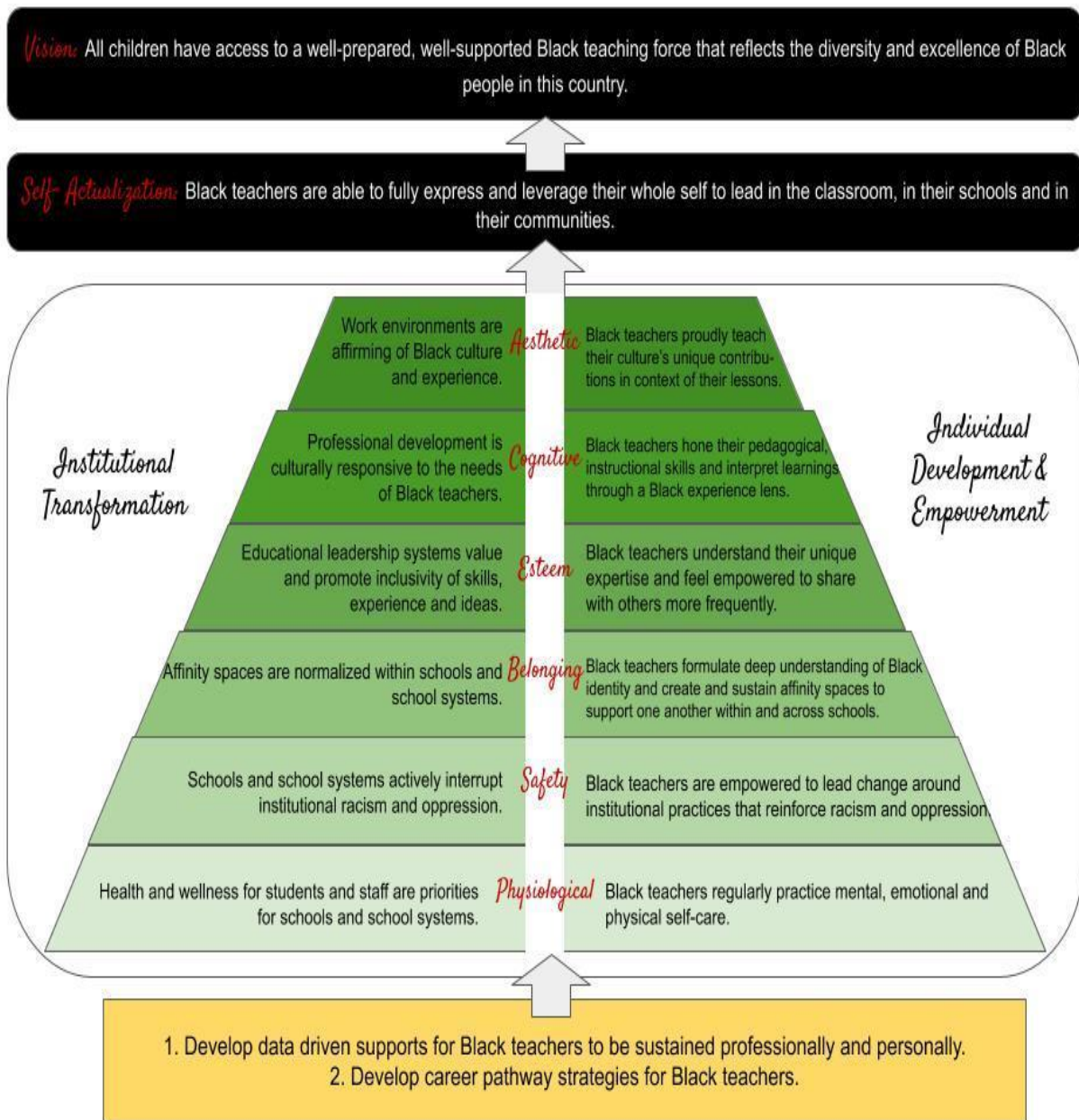## A Transformative Approach to Professional Development

Professional development too often focuses on equipping teachers to become more effective reproducers of inequity. Educators are considered effective when we help students find success

in the current system through better grades and test scores that lead to access to exclusive institutions of higher education. An alternative paradigm, transformation in professional development, occurs when teachers learn how to help their students gain the knowledge and skills to pursue equity in our society. This latter process requires that participants engage in deeper analysis of existing patterns and power dynamics. Transformation in education is a process that calls us to make meaning in three ways: alone, in affinity, and in alliance across difference (Peters, 2016).

"Alone" being comparatively straightforward, I will turn to the second aspect of meaning-making: affinity. The Black Teacher Project (BTP) is an affinity-based program of The National Equity Project with the explicit aim of building a Black teaching force to transform schools. I was drawn to this work in response to my own experience and the parallel experiences of one of my former students; we started out ready to use teaching and learning to help Black people, but were confronted with a system that kept pushing us to reproduce inequitable systems we had found success in – even as we were pushed to completely ignore the internalized oppression that had contributed to our success. I realized no transformation can come until critical numbers of individuals and groups focus on addressing and actively seeking to heal from harm.

Black Teacher Project participants believe that pursuing such pathways in and through racial affinity can allow us to tap into the healing power of Black people and collectively move forward to change our conditions. Though race-based, this affinity group is not a call to segregation. It is voluntary and our collective purpose is reimagining who has the power to choose what happens to and with Black bodies. Many Black people who choose to work and learn with each other, such as the previously mentioned residents of Greenwood and students and educators in historically Black colleges and universities, are focused not on the exclusion of others but on building a sense of Black belonging while shifting the spaces in which they work. Our theory of change (Figure 1) highlights the importance of working with individuals who have been harmed, as well as with institutions that have caused or perpetuated those harms.

Figure 1. The Black Teacher Project Theory of Change

Vision: All children have access to a well-prepared, well-supported Black teaching force that reflects the diversity and excellence of Black people in this country.

Self-Actualization: Black teachers are able to fully express and leverage their whole self to lead in the classroom, in their schools and in their communities.

Institutional Transformation

Individual Development & Empowerment

	Institutional Transformation	Individual Development & Empowerment
Aesthetic	Work environments are affirming of Black culture and experience.	Black teachers proudly teach their culture's unique contributions in context of their lessons.
Cognitive	Professional development is culturally responsive to the needs of Black teachers.	Black teachers hone their pedagogical, instructional skills and interpret learnings through a Black experience lens.
Esteem	Educational leadership systems value and promote inclusivity of skills, experience and ideas.	Black teachers understand their unique expertise and feel empowered to share with others more frequently.
Belonging	Affinity spaces are normalized within schools and school systems.	Black teachers formulate deep understanding of Black identity and create and sustain affinity spaces to support one another within and across schools.
Safety	Schools and school systems actively interrupt institutional racism and oppression.	Black teachers are empowered to lead change around institutional practices that reinforce racism and oppression.
Physiological	Health and wellness for students and staff are priorities for schools and school systems.	Black teachers regularly practice mental, emotional and physical self-care.

1. Develop data driven supports for Black teachers to be sustained professionally and personally.
2. Develop career pathway strategies for Black teachers.

The transformative approach outlined in our theory of change manifests in several programs and services for Black teachers and those with whom they work. In that vein, the Black Teacher Project began offering the following programs in the fall of 2016:

Recruiting and Hiring Black Teachers

This session helps administrators and hiring managers use an equity lens to understand what is necessary to recruit, hire, and sustain Black teachers for their schools. Participants

assess their current efforts and learn more about effective practices for recruiting and hiring Black teachers.

Navigating the Job Search

This workshop teaches participants about indicators that will help them determine whether a school is a welcoming environment for Black teachers. Participants also gain exposure to important practices for applications, interviews, demo lessons, and other parts of the job search process.

Inquiry Group

Through use of equity-based protocols and culturally relevant practices, participants explore issues in their teaching practice with support from a racial affinity-based professional learning community. The Inquiry Group enables Black teachers to identify challenges in their classrooms and schools, while providing tools and encouragement to develop sustainable solutions.

Book Study

The BTP Book Study is a space where participants discuss books that allow Black teachers to examine their knowledge and practice using culturally responsive approaches. They identify and utilize instructional practices while sharing their learnings and impact on students.

Listening Sessions

During BTP listening sessions, we interview and/or hold a focus group with Black teachers (and other Black staff, if needed) to gain insight about their experiences in the district or specific school. Subsequently, we conduct an asset and needs assessment, which includes provision of a report that summarizes our findings and recommendations.

Self-Care and Wellness in the Age of Anti-Blackness

This set of workshops focuses on understanding the impact of anti-Blackness on Black teachers. Attendees gain skills to support their physical, emotional, and social health to sustain themselves as teachers and leaders in their communities.

Black Teacher Leadership and Sustainability Institute

The Black Teacher Leadership and Sustainability Institute is a 2.5-day experiential institute providing ample opportunities for Black teachers to share, reflect, and set intentions for how to lead from the classroom. Participants learn, examine, and discover...

- the effects of racism and other biases on education policies and practices;
- the implicit and explicit work of Black teachers in the United States;
- individual and organizational dynamics that impede the development and sustainability of Black teachers;
- concrete skills for health and wellness in challenging contexts;
- the importance of emotional intelligence and wellness in being a Black teacher in schools; and
- research, tools, and other resources to support the leadership and sustainability of Black teachers in an oppressive system.

Leading from The Classroom

This workshop is a one-day follow-up session to our Black Teacher Leadership and Sustainability Institute programming. The content aims to help teachers deepen and apply emergent knowledge and skills.

Fellows

Our teacher–leader Fellows engage in ongoing classroom-based inquiry that aligns activities in the Fellows program with professional advancement (clearing your credential, national board certification requirements, etc.). BTP Fellows earn stipends and access a comprehensive menu of services and support, including instructional coaching, professional development, mentorship, and leadership development conferences that position them to attain their educational goals as leaders in their field.

A Transformative Justice Lens for Teacher Education: Key Values of the Black Teacher Project

Criminologist and restorative justice theorist Howard Zehr (2002) argues that the premise behind transformative justice "begins with a concern for victims and how to meet their needs, for repairing the harm as much as possible, both concretely and symbolically," a process that "involves a reorientation of how we think about crime and justice" (p. 21). This is consistent

with the Black Teacher Project's thorough focus on Black teachers and helping these educators heal enough on personal and collective levels to ground and reinvigorate their transformative work.

The Black Teacher Project calls on all education professionals to personally acknowledge intersections of injustice and the pervasiveness of White superiority discourses, norms, and practices within our communities, schools, and classrooms. Numerous scholars, for many decades, have pointed out the need for teachers and teacher educators to acknowledge the centrality of racism and intersectional oppression in people's lives and futures, to reject and disrupt these norms, and to honor and build on the rich history of empowerment of and by people of color (see, for example, Siddle Walker, 1996; Winn, 2018).

Two lead teachers participating in BTP programming recently noted their appreciation for a space where they, as Black gay men, could recognize multiple intersections of injustice and honor the fullness of who they are in their professional practice. BTP participants examine racial identity development in ways that connect to other aspects of their identity and link it to their work with focal students. In this case, BTP gave these educators the framework and opportunity to address their common oppression as Black males in the U.S. while developing the skills to navigate various complexities of sexuality and gender expression in Black masculinity in the context of a classroom community wherein the students identified as heterosexual, struggled to navigate schooling rooted in anti-Black frames, and did not know how to articulate their experiences. These teachers were able to have conversations and make connections with their students through personal efforts to heal their own internalized homophobia and classism. One teacher shared, "I could stop compartmentalizing how I showed up with my students. I didn't have to perform a particular kind of Blackness for them. I could just be myself and look for authentic connections." Recognizing the diversity of Blackness represented by and through their Black teacher peers and students, these teachers were able to express their full selves in the service of and as a model for their students.

To support such a process, the Black Teacher Leadership and Sustainability Institute dedicates time to reflection on key historical events that have shaped and continue to shape Black education. This experience allows participants to locate and share the pain they too often feel within the frameworks of intentional choices by social and political leaders who maintain and/or exacerbate recurring practices and institutions of systemic oppression. To further highlight historically-relevant patterns and tensions of harm and resiliency, BTP celebrates Black History Month by honoring the wisdom of elders in our community who share their stories of empowerment and resilience, offering Black teachers with varying degrees of experience key practices and tactics to resist the ongoing oppression they encounter in their work environments.

One elder who has shared her stories two of the past three years was taught by Mary McCloud Bethune. Connecting the lessons Ms. Bethune taught her with the present moment, this participant reminded the group that, "none of the trauma that our babies is experiencing is new. These systems were not set up for us. But we will not make the changes we want to see until we come together to learn who we truly are and what we are capable of. We can't believe the lies others have told us. We must remember that we are still here."

A second goal and key value of the Black Teacher Project is to embrace the ethical responsibility of centering the lives, values, and legacies of marginalized students and their families to begin to repair their personal and shared experiences of harm – and to build the awareness and contexts necessary to avoid inflicting additional harm through and during their academic trajectories. In the past decade, researchers have proposed that "trauma-informed" educational practices must permeate the policies, curriculum, and pedagogies of schools and communities. A large body of this research responds to school shootings, adverse family events, childhood violence, and other such events (Walkley & Cox, 2013; Morgan, Pendergast, Brown, & Heck, 2015; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016).

Though disenfranchised students are understood to be disproportionately exposed to trauma due to race and class factors, the literature typically defines trauma through lenses of mental health and child development that focus on personal experiences. Moreover, many teachers are not disenfranchised themselves, nor have they experienced "secondary traumatization" (Carello & Butler, 2015), indirect experiences of trauma experienced vicariously. Yet non-White, non-heteronormative communities (as one of many examples) have always experienced intersectional trauma as foundational to the fabric of American society, and thus continue to experience harm that is intergenerational, trans-historic, and collective. Effectively confronting these harms necessarily involves collective-level legacies as a starting point. For this reason, BTP's tools for "radical healing" (Ginwright, 2010) are trauma-informed but also tied to Critical Race Theory and TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2015), supporting counter-narratives of surviving and healing from harm that can become a pathway to collective liberation and decolonization.

Black teachers in our Fellows program engage in leadership projects that address various barriers to long-term commitment to the teaching profession. We understand these barriers from trauma-informed, critical race, and decolonization perspectives that focus on how to shift dynamics when individuals and groups are not in right relation with each other. Facilitating shifts that help students and their communities be in right relation is an Indigenous epistemology (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019) that moves with and beyond the more Whitestream concept of "relational pedagogy" (Morgan et al., 2015) to repair relationships that have been twisted and sometimes broken by intensely and collectively harmful legacies such as chattel slavery, colonization, and contemporary anti-Black realities.

In 2018/19, two of our Fellows who were leading Black girls' groups in their schools identified not being in right relationship as a factor that might drive them from the classroom – and being in right relationship as a factor that might keep them committed and energized to their work. Both sensed that this was also the case for student engagement. One teacher's school was merging with another and she was on the design team; she shared that she wanted to design a school where Black girls could thrive and committed to that focus. In a similar vein, BTP participants have co-created tools for teachers to heal relationships amongst teachers and students using the transhistorical epistemologies of Black feminism and the Black Radical Tradition (Gilmore, 2014). Right relationships are a crucial aspect of transformative justice. Leadership, in such a framework, involves seeking and maintaining right relations with our ancestors, our students and communities, and ourselves.

The BTP community has begun to measure the impact and effectiveness of our racial affinity-based professional development approach and implementation, and Fellows programming now incorporates the elements of the emergent strategy framework (Brown, 2017) that have been found most relevant to our work:

- Fractals: how changes for the larger cohort are mirrored at the individual level (and vice versa)
- Adaptive: how Fellows have, can, or will adapt practices and activities to promote program and personal goals
- Interdependence: how relationships between Fellows, BTP staff, school staff, and students facilitate program and personal goals
- Iterative: BTP pathways that emerge to support individual development and empowerment, and how this outcome reinforces or changes these pathways
- Resilience: how the BTP Fellowship empowers Black teachers, and how these teachers in turn support others, to develop power, voice, agency, and healing
- Creating more possibilities: exploring opportunities for Fellows or BTP programming to expand in new directions

Lastly, the Black Teacher Project community notes that teachers and teacher educators must commit to identifying, cultivating, leveraging, and sustaining historically marginalized epistemologies that support positive learning outcomes and educational paths less harmful and biased than mainstream approaches such as ability tracking, disproportionate placement of Black and male students in special education, Q tests, standardized tests, norm-referenced assessments, etc. (Annamma et al., 2018). To reimagine and begin to explore how alternative approaches might be highlighted and established, our Fellows program seeks to redefine the goals and measures of success for Black teacher excellence. We modeled this by evaluating the program based on the principles of Emergent Strategy. We are currently using the work and experiences of Black Teachers to redefine teacher excellence and effectiveness through a culturally

responsive Black experience lens. Too often, excellent and effective teaching are defined through the narrow lens of the majority of the teaching force, White women (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018). Using a Black experience lens, Black teachers can highlight the assets and connections between race, culture, pedagogy, and students' academic and social success.

Conclusion

Transformative Justice principles offer educators an opportunity to analyze the experiences of Black teachers and marginalized student cohorts with the goal of understanding and healing harm. It has been the experience of the Black Teacher Project community that professional development for Black teachers must include critical racial affinity healing experiences. We believe such an approach can interrupt harmful ways of addressing and assessing Black minds and bodies in schools, by ensuring that educator leaders are equipped to approach and support their students in more constructive ways and to model constructive practices and relationships for their students and their professional peers.

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