

EDUCATING AS BOTH PROPHETIC AND POLITICAL

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Abstract:

Black children can no longer afford for school and district leaders to overlook and excuse the ignorance and/or blatant racism of its teachers and administrative colleagues. To meet the challenge of racial inequities in the classroom and beyond, White educators must be prophetic in their practice, and that requires that they be political.

Earlier this year, I gave a professional development presentation to colleagues at a directors meeting. My topic was “cultural competency and the brain” and the crescendo of my presentation centered on the thought: educators must confront and eradicate anti-Blackness within their schools. When I said the words anti-Blackness, you could hear a pin drop.

At one point, I spoke of the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in our society; citing Black women who die due to child birthing complications as a result of poor medical attention (Roeder, 2019) and Black people remain incarcerated for selling marijuana as White people profit from it (Southerland & Steinberg, 2018).

I only had one Black teacher during my time in grade school and that was Kindergarten. None of my teachers spoke to the anti-Blackness in our society to any of my classes. As we learned about literature, history, science, and math, rarely, if ever, did the perspectives in those textbooks match my own or those of my classmates. We were told to not let anything hold us back; that only a lack of hard work and determination could prevent us from achieving our potential.

Unfortunately, my teachers failed to discuss matters of history, literature, science, and math that would help me navigate an anti-Black society as I grew and would become an adult. I wasn't prepared for the moment when I had to decide if I should or should not cut my hair to get a job. I wasn't prepared for doctors to disregard my wife's pregnancy concerns; we would lose our first child and she almost lost her life.

I experienced these things and others prior to entering the teaching profession. I vowed to prepare my students for a world that awaited them by giving them the tools to navigate through it.

As I was packing up, a colleague came to me and thanked me for my passion and presentation, but she had a recommendation. She said that I should stay away from the political talk; that White educators would be more accepting of my message that way.

I answered her saying that my words were intentional and meant to strike a dividing line whereby hearers would have to choose a side and wrestle with where they stood. She politely smiled and said that she understood but advised, being political will turn away the people I sought to reach: White educators.

I politely smiled back and said, “Ma'am to be an educator is to be political.”

We live in a time where the people who have traditionally held political power and socioeconomic mobility in the United States, White people, are threatened by the reality that White Heterosexual Christian hegemony is in decline. Thus, it is no accident that there are racist voices, sexist voices, anti-Black, anti-immigrant, anti-trans, homophobic, Islamophobic, and anti-Semitic voices that have been made relevant. Nevertheless, our nation continues to reflect the world that is; a human family of many colors, faiths, and experiences.

What plagues our nation isn't tribalism or identity politics. Rather, it's the lies many perpetually recycle within our schools, our politics, and our justice system. With each generation, the truths of the marginalized and oppressed are buried so that their stories are never told. However, without learning of and reflecting on those truths that have yet to be unearthed, justice can never happen.

Such is our history. We fight to shield our children from America's original sin of slavery and its remnants; public policy informed by White supremacy which has infected our systems and institutions. Mainstream society promotes colorblindness and hard work; enabling White people to utilize racist policies that deny Black and Brown people of opportunity to access what our society says they are entitled to: power and wealth—see Aunt Becky (Ruiz, 2019).

Whether or not White people were taught that Black and Latinx folks are inferior, many believe that racism is not a matter of policy but rather a matter of individual ignorance (Pew Research Center, 2016). And while the majority of students in our country are students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a), the majority of teachers are White (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.b).

Thus, there are White teachers teaching Black and Brown children who are either ignorant of, or worse, willingly disregard racism's impact on those students lives.

Black children can no longer afford for school and district leaders to overlook and excuse one's ignorance or dismissal of racism.

For educators to truly change our world—what it means for White educators to love Black and Brown students (Love, 2019)—they must be prophetic in their practice, and that requires that they be political. Detractors will disagree, saying that teachers should keep their political leanings to themselves; that students shouldn't be able to tell whether their teacher is a liberal or conservative. That's not the argument I am making; we should not conflate one's personal politics with being political in function.

For example, one's personal politics regarding marijuana legislation does not preclude them from teaching on the hypocrisy of Black people remaining in prison for possessing marijuana while White people become entrepreneurs in the wake of marijuana legalization.

One's personal politics is a matter of the beliefs, morals, and agendas that influence the stance taken. However, the act of being political as a teacher is a matter of truth-telling versus brainwashing.

Teachers must be truth-tellers.

Educators engage in the political each day. However, much of that engagement—said to promote good citizenship—actually promotes political propaganda; that the United States of America is exceptional. Can a nation be called exceptional when laws are in place to suppress the votes of its citizens, or if lawmakers can't pass legislation to prevent mass shootings, or if Black people fear for their lives when encountered by law enforcement?

Maybe, it can be.

Schools choosing to enforce that students recite the Pledge of Allegiance each day engage in political action. A teacher or a school placing and maintaining an American flag in the classroom is a political action. Teachers requiring students to draw and color the American flag is a political action.

None of this is prophetic; it doesn't challenge who and what we are.

Being prophetic means speaking truth to power while hopeful in the face of injustice. Being a prophetic educator means providing young people with the knowledge and skills to apply what they've learned for the benefit of their communities and society at large. Prophetic teaching explains why some children have unclean drinking water as students learn how chemicals purify water. Prophetic teaching explains why and how drugs enter poor communities where Black and Latinx communities may reside as they learn about how drug use impacts human health.

However, prophetic teaching is incomplete without political action. If prophetic teaching is the *what*, *how*, and *why*, political action answers the call to service.

Being political is having the courage to question America's allegiance to students who recite it each day together with those students; among those being Muslim children, children who identify as LGBTQ, children who may be immigrants, Black children, and White children who are taught that Whiteness will never fail them, yet they too may be without healthcare, have parents

who've suffered job loss, and who may witness crime in their communities.

The role of every educator in this nation must be to speak on that truth that they may inspire, empower, and activate.

Being political requires teachers to take a moral stance within their teaching, humanizing all peoples while accounting for both their history and culture. Building on prophetic teaching, teachers can now use assessment as an opportunity to engage in political action to impact lives. Students can choose to create water purifiers to provide clean drinking water to those without as a result of learning how chemicals purify water. Students can choose to write to local representatives and even testify in legislative chambers to advocate for or against legalizing marijuana, as a result of learning about the health effects of drugs.

Educators have no other choice if they wish to make a difference.

White educators have no choice if they wish to be trusted by all students to teach them. They must know that they are the difference between status quo and revolution. Teaching is a revolutionary act. To teach populations of historically oppressed people means either training revolutionaries or simply preparing children for an existence that will require that they only strive to be compliant.

If you desire to enter into the teaching profession, a revolutionary profession, you must be prophetic and political. If not, you will only assist in contributing to systems of oppression whereby people fail to see the power of intersectionality and how group solidarity can heal our world.

To be both prophetic and political will assist in breaking down systems of oppression whereby people believe in each other rather than in a world built on their cultivated ignorance. The prophetic and political educator will provide their students with the tools to actually take hold of the world they were promised, but never received.

The African American experience is built upon striving after two deep human needs: freedom and power. These strivings are synonymous with the experience of all people of color since the arrival of the European in the West. Each day, the educator must ask themselves, who they've freed and who they've empowered.

If you have neither freed nor empowered your students, I only ask that you have the courage to answer who you have emboldened by virtue of your silence; so that we know who you are.

Rann Miller has a wealth of knowledge surrounding cultural responsiveness in an American landscape and is an educator with a passion for urban education and a heart for empowering students, families and fellow educators. He is currently the director of an afterschool program and a former social studies teacher in urban charter schools. Rann is the author of two books and a blog: [The Double D's of Destruction](#), [The Cooper Street Offense](#), and the [Urban Education Mixtape Blog](#). He is also a contributing author in the edited work titled [Black Male Teachers: Diversifying the United States' Teacher Workforce](#) and is featured in numerous online publications: [his work can be found here](#).

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