

## ***Radical Self-Care for Educators through Radical Student Check-Ins***

**William N. Thomas, IV**

*Philadelphia, PA*

I have worked in pandemic time to make sense of the many challenges facing Black educators. From our health pandemic to the increase in racial tensions, as a Black educator I've had to lead others during these difficult events and attempt to take care of myself and support my family. The many intersections of health, criminal justice, education, and race come into collision as I attempt to complete a dissertation as a full-time educational leader during a global health crisis.

After taking courses with Dr. Ravitch and engaging in supervised research, I began to integrate one key dimension of flux pedagogy. The idea of radical self-care started to resonate with me as I began to push myself to consciously process the traumatic events of the last year. As a result of this self-inquiry, I began writing about my own "radical self-care" experience and sharing it with a community educators across the country. I was asked to join a panel of educators to discuss how teachers and parents should prepare for the new school year with the many social and health anxieties that seem to dominate those preparing students for learning. The events of Jacob Blake sparked me to write a piece focused on the importance of Black Male Educators practicing radical self-care using what I call the 3Ms: Self-Management, Self-Monitoring and Self-Motivation. Inspired by flux pedagogy, I decided to reflect on the importance of "radical self-care" for educators and its connection to "radical student check-ins."

### **Radical Student Check-ins**

The difficult balancing act of work-life, home-life and school-life can cause foreigners to the Ivory Tower (like myself) to lose focus on the important role practitioners play in expanding the craft of teaching and strategies for navigating the political landscape of education. As I complete doctoral studies in Educational Leadership, I am reflective about my experiences with my students during my teaching years; mainly wondering whether I had a positive impact on their ability to navigate the world in these challenging times. During the start of my dissertation data collection this summer, I received a message on LinkedIn from a student I taught in fifth grade who is now a college student excited to reconnect with me after a paradigm-shifting eight years:

*Hey Professor Thomas! I'm not sure if you remember me but I'm Tiana from 5th grade at CAPCS. I searched the internet for hours looking for a way to contact you. You honestly had the biggest impact in my life, out of my 12 years of being in school. I will always be grateful to have learned from you!*

As an educator, I was immediately reminded of the ‘teaching mystique’ of being a teacher which brings us so much motivation and optimism for future generations. My current administrative role in central office puts a certain degree of distance between those deep, impactful relationships developed on the campus level. I wrote back to my former student with a sense of renewed purpose as an educator and felt reaffirmed that my maverick educational techniques did not traumatize all my students:

*So great to hear from you! I hope you have been well there in Columbus. Are you still swimming? I am honored to hear that I impacted your life knowing how hard I was on kids. I have been feeling guilty some days when I think of ways I could have been a better teacher so this means the world to me! How is your mother and grandmother? What about your little niece? Please give them my best. I hope you have been staying healthy and safe during this time. Please feel free to reach out for anything you might need! So glad you found me!*

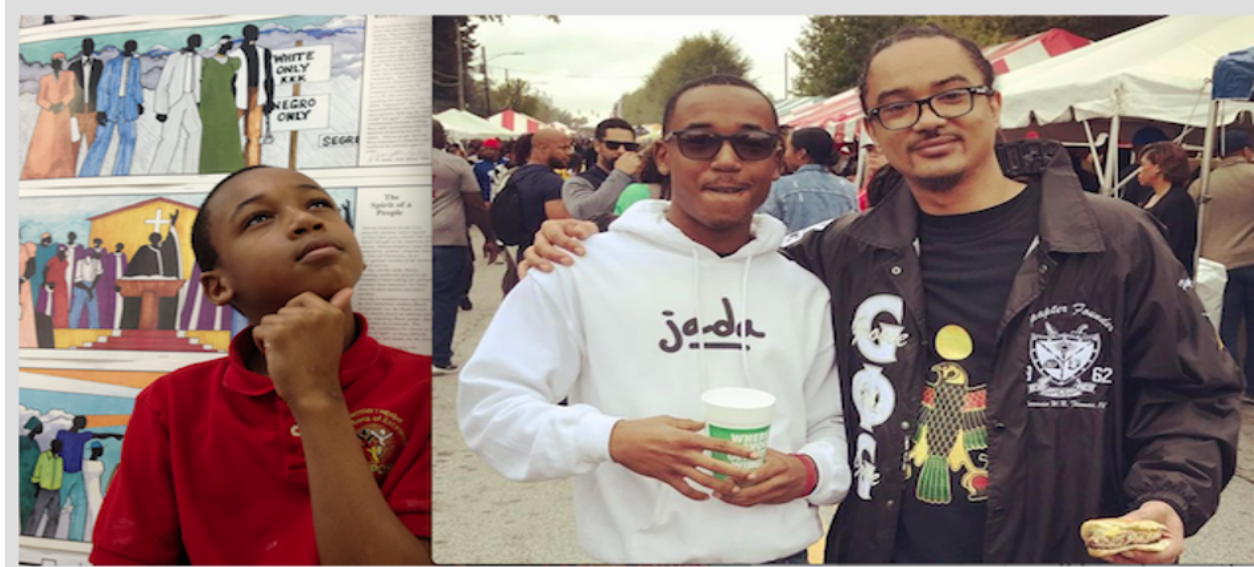
My experience interviewing Morehouse College alumni who were current and former teachers for my dissertation forced me to be reflective on my own motivations as a teacher and now as an educational leader. I was able to get over 100 survey responses and interview brothers who I had deep personal relationships with as well as those I met for the first time. Regardless of the level of relational proximity, we were able to co-generate knowledge based on the intentional activation of life milestones that connected to their experiences as teachers.

These interviews became therapeutic for us, especially as we watched the acts of racial injustice that took place across this year. I was proud that the institution of higher learning that developed me into the educator that I am, had produced countless Black men who defied the odds, took the road less traveled, and committed themselves to the upliftment of underserved communities through the vehicle of teaching. As I concluded data collection, I received another message from the same former student that speaks to the impact teachers have on our students’ racial literacy and identity:

*The only way you could have been a better teacher was if you paid for everyone to go to college lol. Don't be hard on yourself! You were the only teacher who taught me to love myself and to be confident in the skin that I'm in. You taught us to be pro Black before we could find out that the world was built against us...*

As I thought about my response, I couldn't help but to think about some of the other students in her class I was particularly proud of and how they have positioned themselves to be successful and grounded in culture and positive identity. One student from the class fulfilled an unwritten aspiration of many Morehouse alumni who were K-12 teachers: He was accepted into Morehouse and enrolled as a Chemical Engineering major! The dream of teaching and having an impact on decisions that can change the trajectory of their life opportunities as Black men fuels my passion for giving young people better educational experiences than I had. I had been

meaning to call him during the pandemic to see how this is impacting his experience at Morehouse but have not carved out the time to do so.



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As a form of self-care and an active reminder of purpose, I have decided to conduct “Radical Student Check-ins” with former students who have taken the initiative to keep in contact with me along with other educators and their former students. From experience tells me that the infinite energy former students bring can propel even the most stressed doctoral student and others to push through the pandemic demands of 2020 and beyond. I have started to internalize the very necessary critical analysis of scholars like Dr. Sharon Ravitch who have articulated various survival strategies through researched theories that can support educational leaders during this time when education is experiencing an accelerated evolution that is exposing inequities that have existed for generations.

### **What are Radical Student Check-ins?**

*Radical Student Check-ins* are a relational inquiry form of “radical self-care” (Brown, 2017) one the many theories within flux pedagogy. These check-ins act as a space for educators to reflect, reactivate and remember the impactful shared experiences with students. This semi-structured interview between moderator, teacher and student serves as a mechanism for self-motivation and affirmation for a life committed in developing life-long learners and independent thinkers.

## Why do educators need “Radical Student Check-ins”?

The current context presents opportunities and challenges related to retaining quality educators motivated to remain in the profession. One core experience in education, for an educator, is the growth and development of students. While some educational leaders remain in the classroom, those who have chosen roles outside of being a teacher can get distracted by the political and economic impact of education and detour necessary professional reflection time on the experiences of students. Some students keep in contact with their former teachers whether they are in college or active in their profession. In order to leverage these strong relationships, *Radical Student Check-ins* give these teacher-student relationships an opportunity to affirm the intentions and benefits of the educational interaction. This affirmation and recognition acts as an instrument to remind both people of the expectations and confidence they have for one another.

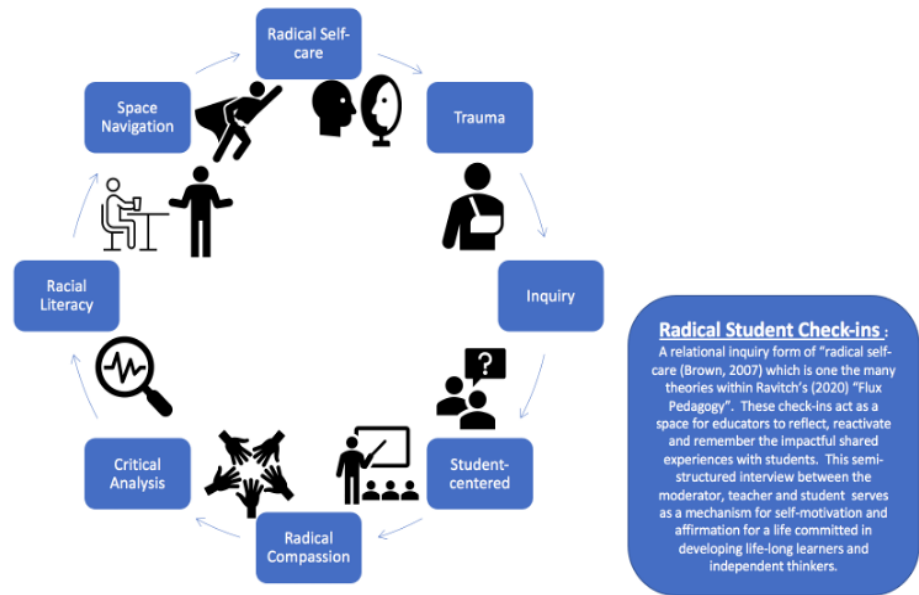
## Framework Design anchored in *Flux Pedagogy*

How do you develop empathetic kindness toward self? The examination of social and political power and systems of dominance can be overwhelming for educators, but key elements of *flux pedagogy* are critical to consider when navigating the changing landscape of education. Activating past success with students can help position educators to rehumanize themselves through communal re-storying of their impact and purpose as an educator. What follows is a summary of those key elements and how they support *Radical Student Check-ins*:

*Trauma Context:* The educator’s experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the graphic coverage of racial injustice has been penetrating and personal. *Radical Self-Care* addresses both the intergenerational trauma that educators experienced prior to the pandemic and the added emotional anxieties that have formed as a result of this heightened awareness to race and health. These traumas weigh heavily on both the educators as well as the students who are attempting to learn as well as understand their identity in a “brave new world.”

*Inquiry Entry Point:* As initiators of radical self-care, as a result of the traumatic context, educators can and should situate themselves as learners to sharpen their craft and generate knowledge that will help build the self-motivation muscle that educators use to innovate and sustain in the school setting. Taking an inquiry stance toward only oneself and toward the students you’ve impacted transcends a moment in history and becomes knowledge for refinement.

## Radical Student Check-ins as a form of Radical Self-care



*"Radical Student Check-ins" anchored in Flux Pedagogy*

*Shared Student-centered Experience:* These check-ins are designed to center inquiry around the pedagogical approaches taken to develop students as life-long learners and independent thinkers. Students should be at the center of any educator's experience and reorienting to the core of why education genuinely exist is critical for educators to reflect on, particularly best practices that have resulted in student success and achievement. The narratives of how students were transformed by teachers through the educational curation of learning nourish an educator's psyche which builds self-esteem and confidence in one's craft and patience within the rapid fire of changing educational expectations.

*Reciprocal Radical Compassion:* Understanding suffering within an equity-oriented framework is easier said than done. This form of radical compassion towards oneself and toward the former student creates the conditions for reciprocal transformation (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998) through the activation of verbalizing and processing shared experiences.

*Critical Collective Analysis:* A part of this process of radical self-care is a layer of critical questioning related to student experiences and the circumstances that contribute to the context. The student and former teacher are expected to interrogate their shared experience in a way that

shows radical compassion that is supported through taking a shared inquiry stance. This process allows for the shared visualization and articulation of milestones in the student's and teacher's experiences which act as a source of motivation and intellectual guidance for all participants.

*Revealing of Racial Literacy:* Giving space for educators and students to reflect on the racial context of their shared experiences and how the climate has evolved is healthy in the process of radical self-care. Teachers do act, in some cases, as real-world role models for students on how to navigate race and identity within professional and sometimes community settings. As educators process and determine ways to support future students with the new challenges of the day, they can also learn from those students who were able to turnkey lessons and then benefit from them.

*Brave and Safe Space Navigation:* While race can sometimes dominate the lens through which students process the world, it is important that they have an opportunity to understand the interrelated relationship between identity and culture. This overlapping experience of culture and identity typically come in various degrees of safe and brave spaces. But how do students navigate these spaces that are now infiltrated with radically polarizing truths that dress themselves within a binary code of philosophy and fake news? The reconnecting of students with teachers who have profoundly influenced their perception of the world can be a starting place for self-reflection and reciprocal radical self-care for former students and educators.

The value of a strong teacher-student relationship is priceless. This bond can last beyond the life of both the student and teacher as they co-create knowledge that others learn from, build, and refine. The leveraging of today's technological capabilities to build relational dynamics positions all participants as learners of the relational literacy being produced in these check-ins. The exchange of shared reflection creates new knowledge that can be used as tools for self-motivation and self 're-discovery' of one's educational philosophy and purpose.

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