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Closing Opportunity Gaps through Love: Challenges & Opportunities

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"There is no mystery on how to teach them. The first thing you do is treat them like human beings and the second thing you do is love them." Dr. Asa Hilliard (1933-2007)

How do you help Black children thrive in schools? *Love them*. A directive that seems simple on the surface, but anyone who has been married or in any committed relationship knows that loving someone is not always easy. It is not the "warm and fuzzy" feeling sometimes depicted in movies or storybooks. Love is a choice. It is a choice to work and serve on behalf of someone; to work and serve even when that person may appear unappreciative or when there may seem to be no benefit for the service. It is a choice to do what is best for the person even when it causes you or the person pain or discomfort. It is not a passive choice. Love requires intention. Loving someone requires inner strength and clarity of conviction. When times get tough, love requires sacrifice, determination, resilience, and a commitment to what is right and good. Love requires grace and a tender heart. As we ponder what love is in relation to teaching, the first question to answer is, what does this type of love look like in the classroom? Secondly, can love close opportunity gaps and lead to more Black children thriving in American schools? This article posits that yes, love can close opportunity gaps, but only the intentional, enduring type of love described above. This is a whatever-it-takes type of love. Akin to what Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008) describe as Revolutionary Love:

> It looks like endless dedication, an unyielding belief in the brilliance and potential of every student, and the commitment to stop at nothing to get kids to learn. It demands the energy and passion to present learning as an amazing opportunity for young people to prepare themselves to be engaged citizens and social actors. This something else [Revolutionary Love] is defined as never giving up. It is a continual search for more effective ways to help young people to learn and to demonstrate their learning in academically and socially powerful ways. This something else is revolutionary love. When teachers see revolutionary change in

> their students, classrooms, and schools, then they will know that they are practicing that sort of love" (p. 187).

Duncan-Andrade and Morrel (2008) say this love is the "something else" (p. 187) teachers must have beyond theories, plans, and instructional practices if they are to effect radical change in their students and in classrooms; in other words, if they are to close the opportunity gaps we speak of in this special issue. And, as I have emphasized in my above explanation of love, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell caution that "love is never easy, because great love also means great pain. It means carrying a burden. It means suffering empathically. It means recognizing and reacting to inequitable conditions that we have the power to change" and having the courage to act (p. 188).

Applying this whatever-it-takes, revolutionary type of love to close opportunity gaps requires first recognizing the reasons for the persistent achievement gap and then understanding the difference between the achievement gap and the opportunity-to-learn gap. It also requires an understanding of challenges teachers may encounter when attempting to love in this way, and finally, to move forward with this type of love, one needs to see an example of this love in action. This article provides all of the above.

Why does the Achievement Gap Persist?

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006), author of *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Students* (1994, 2009), offers a transformative theory on how we should perceive and address the achievement gap. She says that the fact that there is a gap is not surprising, given the history of racism and inequitable distribution of resources in the United States of America. She depicts the achievement gap as being a result of a series of "debts" the U.S. has accumulated and "deficits" people of color have as a result. The historical debt she identifies involves how the nation has viewed minority races as inferior and has profited from their free labor. This debt also involves how education had been legally denied to minorities and how assimilation theory has created minorities as outcasts. The economic debt involves how "separate schooling always allows for differential funding" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 6); the amount of funding schools receive rises with the increase in white students. Ladson-Billings argues that this achievement gap vs. debt idea can be compared to the income vs. wealth disparity. She asserts that because of income disparity and the historical debt, Blacks have not been able to build wealth at the same rate and level as Whites (Mandara, et al., 2009; Oliver & Shapiro, 1997, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2006). The same, she posits, could be true for achievement. Because Blacks' access to education has historically been more limited than Whites', collectively, their academic achievement levels may not be on par with their white peers. Of course, there are exceptions—Black people who outperform their white peers and white people who lag behind Blacks academically; however, in the same way Blacks have not been able to build wealth at the same rate and level as Whites because their income has historically been less and their access to generational wealth has been stymied, so are they often academically disadvantaged in comparison to their white peers because of generations of denied educational opportunities.

Lastly, Ladson-Billings (2006) discusses the country's moral debt owed to historically marginalized people of color, describing it as the "disparity between what we know is right and what we do" (p. 8). She argues that all of these debts must be considered when examining the achievement gap. As Ladson-Billings's reasoning has shown us, the achievement gap is a given because of our history and the educational debt that America has inherited that needs to be repaid through equitable opportunities for Black students. It is the opportunity-to-learn gap that we can address. By addressing increased opportunities for Black students, we chip away at the educational debt that has accumulated throughout history. We can begin to pay back the debts by providing equitable opportunities for students to learn.

What is the opportunity-to-learn gap?

An alternative view of the achievement gap is the opportunity-to-learn gap (Hillard, 2003; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2010), the focus of the symposium at which this lecture was delivered. This alternative view considers the achievement gap through a *process* lens rather than a *product* lens. This process perspective frames the gap as the *opportunities* (Hilliard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006) students have to learn and the quality of teaching service that they receive (Hilliard, 2003). As I have already discussed, Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that the United States has denied Black Americans historical, economic, socio-political, and moral opportunities that have resulted in a persistent achievement gap. These stolen opportunities have resulted in an educational deficit (i.e. in an achievement gap) for Black students and closing the deficit—providing opportunities for progress—is the answer to closing opportunity gaps.

This article is based on the premise that good teaching, teaching that demonstrates and reflects love, can close opportunity and achievement gaps. I remind you that this "whatever it takes" type of love is a choice and requires intentionality. For the purpose of this article, I am defining "whatever-it-takes" love as a love that challenges the status quo thinking about Blackness and about teaching. It is a love that goes over and beyond the call of duty to meet students where they are and help them grow to new levels of learning, and it is a love that persists through challenges and discomfort.

Loving Through Care, Creativity, and Courage

When speaking to those contemplating pursuing a degree in teaching, I often say, "Caring, creative, and courageous people make good teachers. Can you care? How creative are you? Are you courageous?" Ultimately, I am asking these guiding questions to help individuals think about the answer to this single question: Can you love all students? I use **CARE**, **CREATIVE**, and **COURAGEOUS** as acronyms that represent qualities and actions necessary to teach effectively—to love. Can you care? Can you show **Concern** for all, **Awareness** for all, **Respect** for all, and **Empathy** for *all*? *All* has become a code word for students of color and particularly African American and Latino students. *All* represents inclusion of students who are not white and at least middle class and who may not speak the language of school; i.e., Standard American English or the language of power (Delpit, 1988). Caring means having genuine concern for the well-being and achievement of *all* and having an awareness of the racialized

experiences (Lopez, 2007) that come along with being a student of color. It also means that one has ventured to walk a few miles in their shoes and thus can attempt to understand why a colorblind (Husband, 2016; Monohan, 2006) approach is not the best approach to teaching these students.

Secondly, I ask prospective teachers to reflect on their **creative** thinking skills, ensuring they recognize that to teach effectively just knowing their content area is not enough. Having strong **Content** knowledge is expected, but so much more is necessary to close opportunity gaps through love. Teachers must also be **Resourceful,** especially those who teach in school districts in which most students are not coming from middle or upper-class homes. They must teach with what they have and they must teach the students in front of them and they must do this **Enthusiastically**, not with a complaining attitude or with a focus on what materials or resources they don't have. Enthusiasm is contagious and students will respond to the energy the teacher brings into the classroom. One must be **Adaptable**—willing to change lesson plans and approaches when what was planned is not working. An effective teacher must always be willing to reflect and ask the question, What can I do differently to help students learn? To close gaps, teachers must be willing to go **The extra mile** for students. Doing just enough to get by will not close gaps. Teachers must be **Innovative**, relying more on novel ideas designed with the students in front of them in mind and relying less on scripted plans or theories that do not take into account the individual and collective identities of each respective class of students. Indeed, gap-closing teachers must be **vision-oriented**. They must have a clear image in their minds of the innovative learning experiences possible in their classroom with their group of learners and they must be willing to do whatever is necessary to bring that vision to life. Lastly, creative, gap-closing teachers **Engage** in interdisciplinary and co-curricular learning opportunities within their school building and community. Learning does not start and stop within their personal classroom; rather, the engaged teacher demonstrates a commitment to high-quality teaching by connecting herself and her students to activities that enhance learning experiences. Being creative in the classroom involves looking outside of the classroom for additional ways to help students learn and thrive.

Beyond being caring and creative, teachers who want to close opportunity gaps for Black and brown students must be **courageous**. The late, great Maya Angelou said "without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We cannot be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest[1]." *And*, I would add, we cannot love in a way that closes opportunity gaps without courage. Courage means continuing on in the face of challenges and in the face of one's own fears. Teachers must overcome their own fears of inadequacy; their own fears of prejudice and ostracism due to their advocacy for students of color; their own fears of repercussions they may face for speaking out against racism and injustice. They must be willing to **Challenge the status quo** in themselves and in the schools and communities in which they teach. They must be committed to **Opportunities for All**; show **Unconditional love** and **Resilience**; they must **Accept the High Calling** of being a teacher, and they must **Get up again and again** to teach even when feeling discouraged, and they must **Expect** to see students achieve. It takes courage to truly teach in a way that closes opportunity gaps.

I use the above acronyms, Caring, Creative, and Courageous, to give those considering teaching as a profession an idea of the mental, emotional, and intellectual rigor required to be an

[1] 1988 Interview in USA Today

effective teacher. I aim to have potential, pre-service and practicing teachers rethink what love means when their knee-jerk response to questions concerning equity is, "I'm colorblind. I love all of my students." I want them to reflect on and reconsider their idea of love. I also want them to begin to think about what internal and external challenges they might encounter in their efforts to teach all students effectively. Teachers must be provided the encouragement and the space to identify and reflect on personal challenges that may be inhibiting their teaching efforts. In the next section, I share results from research that centers on a key challenge Black teachers have reported encountering in their experiences teaching Black students: positional frustration.

Positional Frustration: The Challenge of Enacting Racial Uplift Pedagogy

Positional frustration, the struggle to position racial uplift in one's pedagogy, is one of the challenges some Black teachers experience in their efforts to help Black students achieve (Carrol, 2017). Precisely, it "involves teachers' push-back against the racial uplift teaching philosophy that has historically informed Black education as well as, contrarily, teachers' sense of guilt about not living up to the "racial uplift" standard set by Black teachers from previous generations" (Carrol, 2017, p. 124). Most of the teachers in this study felt there was something special they should do for their Black students because they were Black teachers and they shared in the struggle that is a common denominator for people of color in this country and particularly Black people. As Black teachers and former Black students, they had a special understanding of what scholar Janice Hale (2001) calls "Learning While Black". They knew they had a responsibility to close the gap. But they struggled with how. Before the *Brown v. Board of Topeka Kansas* decision (1954), racial uplift was a given for Black teachers. That was a part of the curriculum (Fairclough, 2004; Irvine, 1989; Perry, 2003; Walker, 2009, 2012). They had to teach students not only the academics, but they also had to teach them how to survive as a Black person in a white world. Educated, middle class Blacks felt it was their duty to uplift the race. For them, education was a means of uplifting the race, of positioning students for academic, economic, civic, and social success. Teachers in the study wanted to still do these things, but couldn't figure out what that looked like in our 21st Century classrooms and in the post-*Brown* era of colorblindness. The Black Lives Matter movement (2013-present) has helped to crystalize this very real struggle as its message highlights that the very existence of this dilemma indicates that the wounds of past and present racism are festering and craving healing balms. This reality manifests itself in schools within the hearts and minds of teachers. The increasing momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd (Hill, Tiefenthäler, Triebert, Jordan, Willis, and Stein, 2020) has awakened white America to the truth that color consciousness (Husband, 2016) not colorblindness is what is necessary to move the nation toward accomplishing the goal of racial equity. The teachers in my study and others (Dickar, 2008; Foster, 1990) were unsure how to be color conscious in a post-*Brown* integrated school environment in which the school and society expect a colorblind teaching approach. This is because part of the post-*Brown* schooling acculturation process included embracing a colorblind approach to teaching: teachers should not see color and they should pretend all of the negative baggage that comes with America's racist origin and history does not exist. This internal and systemic question of how to position racial realities and knowledge in the classroom is one that must be answered if teachers are to close opportunity gaps through love. Critical theorists Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) argue that Revolutionary Love is not possible without

addressing the trauma associated with learning in hegemonic classroom spaces governed by a historically socially oppressive education system.

How, then, can teachers address the positional frustration they feel about race in the classroom? I propose that there is a need for a transformed racial uplift pedagogy for contemporary school environments. I put forward that racial uplift does not have to be a divisive term when we think about helping Black students thrive. Racial uplift is another way of saying close the encouragement gap and the perspective-of-potential gap between white students and students of color. It means close the love gap. It means to lift up a race of people that have historically been dismissed and put down. Lifting students up means seeing Black students through a lens of potential and not a deficit lens that is based on society's historical devaluation of kids of color and their potential. It means approaching teaching with an equity lens—that is, give all students what they need instead of giving all students the same thing to be fair or equal (being colorblind). When we look at what Black students need, we must recognize the educational debt and moral debt that has accrued on the backs of this race of people. As we plan and deliver lessons, discuss students in meetings, and interact with them, we must consider the stereotype threat phenomenon (Steele and Aranson, 1995) which says that just the threat of confirming a negative stereotype about one's identity group (in this case, racial identity) causes students of color to underperform in testing and other academic situations, and we must recognize that many, if not most, Black and brown children may carry this type of racial trauma with them into the classroom. Trauma that is a result of nothing more than a fear of failure, disgrace, or underperformance due to the color of their skin and the negative labels society has placed on that particular color. To address the challenge of positional frustration, teachers must embrace and enact a 21st century pedagogy of racial uplift that has a whatever-it-takes type of love at its core.

Ms. Kelly, a teacher in a research study I conducted on the perspectives and experiences of Black teachers who taught Black students, demonstrated elements of what modern-day racial uplift and the accompanying intentional, enduring love looks like in action. Her reflections and responses so powerfully reflect gap-closing love that I have included them in this article as raw data.

Ms. Kelly Reflects on a "Whatever-it-takes" Experience

> Ah! I remember the day Darla Hayes told me she wanted to go away for the summer, that she hated babysitting her brother and she refused to do it another summer. She'd rather be writing a new script or chapters for her book. I got on that computer and found a journalism camp at Brown University. Immediately printed the application and Darla and I read through it. She was happy but said her mom didn't have or wouldn't pay thousands of dollars for her to go "write" for the summer. I thought about my mom, 'what would she do here?' I didn't have thousands to lend—not on this school teacher's budget—but there were ways. It had to happen.

In other words, Mr. Kelly had to close the gap.

> Over the next six months, we did bake sales, cookies, brownies, cupcakes, banana pudding, etcetera… that was another one of Darla's hobbies. She enjoyed baking.

> We made greeting cards for Christmas. We sold candy-grams for Valentine's Day. Bottom line, on June 17th, Darla packed all her things and headed to Brown for the summer to become a better writer.
>
> (Writing Prompt #3)

Ms. Kelly used her creative-thinking and genuine care to close an opportunity gap for Darla. She had a vision for what was possible for Darla that Darla saw as impossible. She went over and beyond the call of duty to open a daunting door for this student. Ms. Kelly did not stop with her content-knowledge; helping this student required more than knowledge of English/Language Arts. She had to be more than just a teacher of content to close the opportunity gap for this student. She had to be the creative, resourceful, innovative, and caring teacher described earlier in this article. Gap-closing teachers do not see students as distant "others"; rather, like Ms. Kelly, who described viewing her African American students as her sisters, brothers, cousins, nieces, and nephews, gap-closing teachers see students through a personal lens—they take personal responsibility for these students and love them as if they were their own. Ms. Kelly said, "With my Black students, especially, and not all, but some, especially my a-level/comp kids, I want to make their learning experience as enriching and carefree as possible. Providing them with extra resources to achieve success (Writing Prompt #3). Ms. Kelly is enacting racial uplift pedagogy; she is making special efforts to ensure her Black students have the resources they need to achieve success, an act that does not require her to give less to other students who may not be Black. She is simply accessing whatever resources are possible to give the Black students who need more an extra boost.

Ms. Kelly Empathizes with an Underperforming Student

As part of the noted study, Ms. Kelly was invited to reflect on her teaching by stepping into the students' shoes and writing a letter to herself from the perspective of one of her students. She chose to write from the perspective of a student who was not achieving at high levels and who struggled to understand the material, but who expressed a desire to learn. This is the type of student Ms. Kelly was working hardest to help achieve.

> Hey Ms. Kelly,
>
> I'ont know why you want me to write this letter, but I'm trying to do better this semester, so I'm getting all my work done. I don't know what it is. I'ont really think English is THAT hard, but kinda like you said, it's hard for me to focus at times. Especially with Kayla always yelling at me and stuff. And I guess cause it's 8th period, and the day almost over, so I'm ready to go home. I mean, at first it got on my nerves when you would sit down beside me and pull up a desk next to me when we're working on our own, but I guess what you told my mom about me getting my work done and getting stuff right when u do that is true. No teacher really spent as much time with me as you do for real for real. And I know I said u always riding me, like when u see me posted up against the lockers between classes and you always be like "David, you should be heading to class so you won't be late" at first it was embarrassing in front of my boys, but now it's like I wait for you to come by and say that. And I think my boys get a little jealous because no one checks up on them like that. And remember when u heard that a bunch of my friends were fighting over the weekend and as soon as u saw me u asked if I was involved and if I was good. Well I really was telling the truth when I said I wasn't fighting, but it kinda made me feel good that you even asked. Most teachers woulda probably judged me or looked at

me in a funny way because I hang out with a rough crowd. I'm gonna start coming to the tutoring sessions that you invited me too more often so I can pass this test u always talking about. And ms. Kelly, u know how u always say I play like I'm hard core, but I'm really soft on the inside…you know what, u might be right. I'ma try to get better @ grammar stuff and do more work on our group research project. I'm bring my F up, watch me! You see I got an 80% on that quiz last Friday. Alright holla at ya boy,
Lil' Tutu…aka Fat Boy…aka David

(Writing Prompt #3, font in original)

The caring, understanding tone of Ms. Kelly's letter suggests she empathizes with the struggling student and does not blame him for his low academic performance or poor work habits. Rather, she faults the insufficient opportunities for learning the student has had, pointing out that the student may not have received the attention he needed from previous teachers. Highlighting the lack of teacher attention this student may have had in the past shows Ms. Kelly is aware that this gap in opportunity is probably part of why Black students like David may be underachieving. She continues to emphasize that part of the problem with David's achievement may be due in part to how teachers judged and interacted with him.

Including these examples of inadequate teacher expectations reflects Ms. Kelly's view of the opportunity-to-learn gap as problematic with regards to helping students like David achieve. Her choice to write her perspective-taking prompt from the perspective of a non-honors, low-achieving student reveals the core of her heart as she strives to impact Black students, moving students like David from the losing to the winning side of the gap.

"It's Tiring but I Have To": Ms. Kelly Adapts Teaching to Meet Students' Needs

Ms. Kelly strives to close gaps not only by providing individualized support and special learning opportunities for students but also by delivering consistent teacher-directed but learner-centered instruction. The sense of urgency she sees in closing the gap is evident in her description of her approach to teaching the students who are not in honors classes:

> They wear me out. I do a lot of teaching, cause I mean, I want them to do that group work and partners, but it's just not, I mean I can do it for like 10 or 15 minutes, you know, but I'm just teaching, like I mean they work, I mean, I'm up there, I'm just going, just doing everything I can to help them get it, whereas with my honors, I have a little more, I can give them more of the responsibility, whereas with them, and I've tried it, and I see that when I'm up there, they're getting it and they're learning, and the classroom is just such a different environment, versus when I try to let them do, so, I'm like, it's tiring, but I have to.
>
> (Ms. Kelly, Interview, February 6, 2012)

A few things to highlight in Ms. Kelly's pedagogical approach: Ms. Kelly teaches with rigor. She models through direct instruction. Yes, students need collaborative learning experiences but not at the expense of direct teacher-led instructions. Ms. Kelly challenges the status quo by having high expectations of all students, not just those tracked into honors or advanced placement classes, which is often the case in schools (Oakes, 2005). Ms. Kelly invests time in her students

beyond the classroom, she knows her students, shows genuine care, is an advocate, has an awareness of the gaps, and believes her students can achieve with her help. She believes not only in her students' capabilities but she also believes in her own.

Teachers, if we want to close gaps through love, let's commit to checking our mindsets every day and in every classroom. We must have minds to:

1. Put relationships first.

   Ms. Kelly cared, she valued, she took the time; she believed in her students; teachers who are encountering barriers preventing them from caring, valuing, and taking the time to really know their students, must admit it and seek help to break through those barriers. Don't be afraid to talk about it. Don't be ashamed. Acknowledge any unconscious bias and get help to adjust thinking. *We have to close the gap.*

2. Bring our A-Game to teaching.

   Model, do think-alouds, connect to lives, stand on your head, whatever it takes. The myth that says Black students cannot sit through lectures or they only want to do group work must be dispelled. Get up there and model; recognize that teaching will take place in traditional and nontraditional ways. It may be with a small group, one on one, but the teacher must bring her A-Game. And growth may not be evident right away; it doesn't matter. In good conscience, gap-closing teachers can rest knowing they adapted to meet students' needs and that they did all they knew to do. *We have to close the gap.*

3. Recognize that gaps in skills are a result of gaps in opportunities.

   These opportunity gaps pre-date you and your classroom. Don't allow systems of tracking within your school to dictate the level of rigor and challenge you present to your students. Close the skills gaps by increasing and strengthening opportunities for students to learn. Build on what they do know and the skills they do have first by recognizing and ensuring they *know* what they know. This will instill confidence in them and provide motivation for learning more. Remember, the achievement gap is the result of an education debt. Don't focus on the gap, focus on the opportunities you will provide to close the gap. We cannot allow the debt to continue building. *We have to close the gap.*

4. Enact a racial uplift pedagogy.

   See racial uplift not as something that suggests prejudice, but as a means to help America repay the debt it owes Black children. Lift Black students up through your positive interactions with them; lift them up through your genuine interest in them; lift them up through your dedication to providing a safe, orderly, rigorous, and culturally relevant classroom environment. Lift them up through your preparedness. Lift them up through your advocacy of them. Lift them up through your awareness of —and response to— racism and social oppression. Lift them up by seeing them as valuable to the world. Lift them up by seeing each of them as a fellow human being and not as an "other" or as an

"exception" or as a charity case. When you lift up Black children, you lift up the race—not to elevate above any other race but to provide what is needed to close the gap, to pay down the debt. Lift them up, my fellow educators. Because (say it with me), *we have to close the gap*.

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