A Safe Place

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I look back, I look forward.
My past awaits my glance back.
Back to Ashley, back to Hillcrest, back to Terry Sanford.
The school buildings that formed me.
The educator, the student, Eboni
All that you see!
I was a loner in my class full of students.
In that moment, the only little black girl tested and labeled.
Academically gifted was my title I carried throughout school.
But where were the others or was one to three blacks the unspoken rule?
The school labeled me "AG" and my peers labeled me "acting white."
Being a scholar, earning good grades, doing well in school,
This is what my grandmother encouraged; this was my goal.
I didn't see the color in it; black, white, silver or gold.

I look back, I look forward.
The future awaits my doing.
I want spaces, I want safety.
I want safe spaces for the Ebonis of tomorrow.
Little black girls who grow up, know your knowledge is not borrowed.
Your voice is heard, you're valued.
You possess ways of knowing.
You're cared for; we support your unique ways of growing.
Ahead I see you being, knowing, and doing in these safe spaces.
Safe to unapologetically be you!

I look back, I look forward.
My right now is what I see in time.
Time, the past and the future stare at me.
As a child, I felt different.
As a college freshman, I felt welcomed on my white campus.
I saw shades of black and brown
In a sea of others, I had a community of us.
As a professional, I felt sad.
The black students shared their stories.
The glares and ugly stares.
I have to be that familiar face
That feeling of connection and support.
I have to be her safe place.

I look back, I look forward.
The Ebonis of tomorrow need a change.

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Access, equity, inclusion, and diversity.
Challenging the dominant voice for those black girls who look like me!
I will use my voice.
I will ask that you use yours.
I will retell your story.
I will ask that you retell yours.
Together we will break down systems of oppression,
One by one, door by door!

The *currere* process has given me the opportunity to reflect on my educational experiences in an effort to transform professionally and personally to become a better adult educator (Edwards, 2021). This method allows me to look back at how impactful my lived experiences are on the way in which I approach my professional work with students and how I envision the future of adult education. McQueen's (2017) article gave me a clearer understanding of Pinar's *currere* method and provided a path to progress through the four stages. As I traversed through the regressive, progressive, analytic, and synthetic stages, I muddled through the Eboni of the past, confronted the Eboni of the now, and anticipate the Eboni of the socially constructed future (Baszile, 2017).

Retelling My Story

Education was always valued in my household growing up. My grandmother played an integral role in my life, and I immediately think of her when I think of my educational journey. I can recall her buying books for me as a child about Black inventors and other related Black history topics. She instilled pride in me about who I was at a very early age. With only her high school diploma, she encouraged me to be a scholar and further my education. As I journey through my doctoral program, I often think of the seeds she planted over 30 years ago and only hope that in her absence the harvest will be reaped by other women who are in need of support, guidance, and advocacy.

I attended kindergarten through 12th grade in the same school district, which was coined the "white schools" in Fayetteville, North Carolina. This term was commonly used because the high school was in fact a white-only high school during segregation. Once the schools were desegregated during the 1970s, the attendance area included the same affluent, white neighborhoods but also the heavily Black-populated government subsidized housing areas. While my schools (elementary, junior, and high) overall had what I would consider a diverse student body, once I entered grade levels that based classroom assignments on performance, I became one of few if not the only Black, female student in my class. I can recall this starting in the fourth grade once I was tested and identified as academically gifted. Being the minority in my classes was the norm, and I did not view it as lacking diversity at that young age because it was all I knew.

During my elementary school years, my friendships included children from all backgrounds and races. There was a distinct shift to almost all Black friends once I started junior high school. I am unsure of the reason for this shift. I and my elementary school friends seemed to gravitate to other students who looked like us. There was also a shift in how I thought about my learning. I was told in the seventh grade from another Black, female student that I thought I was white because I made good grades. At the age of 12, I had never heard of "white grades," so I was confused by what she meant and questioned why grades were associated with a race.

Future Stories

As I matriculated through high school and college, I became passionate about education and the experiences of students. Upon entering the professional field of education, I found my fulfillment working in higher education and specifically with adult students. Educational access, educational experiences, and motivation to pursue post-secondary education of students who look like me, a Black, female adult learner, peaked my research interests and fueled my desire to become a change agent.

I envision a future that encompasses spaces inside and outside the classroom that are safe for all learners including Black, female, adult learners. Historically marginalized groups have been silenced; therefore, there is a dire need for the voices of Black, female, adult learners to be heard (Sheard, 1994).

As educators consider classroom environment, curriculum, and academic support services, close attention should be given to dialogue and giving a voice to those learners in marginalized groups. Dialogue is a critical concept in the Black feminist theory that seeks to challenge knowledge and how adult learners make meaning. Knowledge is a product of learners' everyday lived experiences, yet authority and hegemony affect these realities. The process of engaging with others gives learners various views and perspectives, which develops connectedness. This connectedness is necessary to assess and validate knowledge (Sheard, 1994).

Black, female, adult learners should tell future stories that demonstrate value, respect, care, connectedness, and a sense of community. Their voices should be welcomed and heard in their classrooms and across their campuses. Educators should reinforce the notion that this subgroup of learners embodies unique ways of knowing. Their futures should tell stories of their lived experiences and realities constructing knowledge, challenging those who say they do not have a voice (Bridwell, 2020; Heikkinen et al., 2012). I see a future where colleges and universities go beyond their well-written diversity and inclusion statements plastered on websites and admissions brochures and begin to truly create a campus atmosphere that lives and breathes it.

Analyzing My Story

I am a Black female who attended a predominately white institution for both of my post-secondary degrees; however, I did not face any challenges while attending my North Carolina public, four-year university. Fall semester 2018, I was employed as an Academic Advisor for first-year students at a private, liberal arts university located in eastern North Carolina. During advising sessions and informal conversations with students, I was bombarded with complaints and concerns. Those complaints came from Black, female students who expressed to me the issues and challenges they were facing on campus, which they felt were racially charged. Although I was aware these issues existed, I did not experience any of these problems during my college journey and was unaware that it was so prevalent on my former campus.

I hurt for my students. They expressed feelings of unworthiness, exclusion, and regret. My students described differential treatment in the classrooms from faculty, the lack of relatable campus programming, negative reception from students in the dining halls, buildings, and student common areas, and minimal staff/faculty members who looked like them. I was disappointed in my former university for creating this type of experience for select students. This small, private university boasted about diversity but forgot about inclusion.

My experience at this private university is why I am currently pursuing my doctoral degree. While I have over 15 years of professional work experience, I saw the need to study in-depth this unique subgroup of Black, female students. I desired to learn more about the experiences of Black, female students. My educational aspirations include filling the gap in the literature as it relates to this group of adult learners and how their educational experiences impact their motivation to pursue education beyond high school. Through this *currere* process, I hope to transform into a reflective educator and a scholar who seeks to create and support educational spaces where students who look like me can feel celebrated and heard.

Beyond My Story

I recently read *Despite the Best Intentions* by Amanda Lewis and John Diamond (2015). This book examines racial inequality at a "good" high school that consistently had a large racial academic achievement gap. This high school mirrored my high school experience in that majority of students in the honors and advance placement (AP) courses were disproportionately white. The book provides several narratives from faculty, staff, students, and parents. I found myself relating to many of the Black students' stories of being the lone Black student in higher level courses. What stood out to me were the stories of the Black students in the regular level courses. They associated their presence in those courses with being less than, slower, basic. Most of the students at the high school in the book, both white and Black, were aware of the racial differences and even referred to the honors/AP courses as "white classes" and the regular level courses as "minority classes." The accounts presented in the book were eye opening to the lived experiences of Black students and the impacts their educational experiences had on their motivation, self-worth, and academic performance (Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

I also read the work of Stephen Brookfield (2005) and was introduced to critical theory. The notion of challenging the dominant narrative jarred a memory from eighth grade. During that school year, I found myself having daily arguments with my social studies teacher regarding misinformation he would present to the class. I felt compelled to speak out against his inaccurate rhetoric regarding Black history, the Black experience, and the contributions of Black people to society. As I continued to read Brookfield's work about hegemony and power structures, I connected with critical discourse and challenging dominant narratives. While I did not experience challenges during college, I began to reflect on my K-12 experiences and saw many instances of authority figures projecting this hegemonic ideology, which one can assume plays a role in reproducing and perpetuating educational inequalities (Brookfield, 2005). As with the students highlighted in Lewis and Diamond's (2015) book, what type of teacher narratives and expectations were my fellow high school classmates in regular level classes exposed to? Did my public schools have practices that negatively impacted students of color? If so, who is speaking up for these students?

Upon reviewing the literature related to the identities of Black, female students, I connected with the womanist perspective, which serves as the basis for Black feminist theory and views race, gender, and class identities as intertwined realities. The Black feminist theory subscribes to the notion of giving a voice to those who have been historically silenced based on both race and gender, not solely race or solely gender (Sheard, 1994).

This topic matters to me because the voices of Black, female, adult learners matter. Their lived experiences, their uniqueness, their stories matter. Just as the junior high

school Eboni challenged the hegemonic, problematic discourse of that time, I am still motivated to challenge the traditional, educational power structures by encouraging students who look like me to find their voice and find value and validation in creating their own knowledge.

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