

WALK WITH ME

AN EDUCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

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Over the years, I have learned that telling my story can be empowering and even therapeutic. There's some truth to this, because in my current role as an elementary school principal, parents often come in to vent and don't have any other requests beyond that. There is a feeling of freedom that comes after being given the chance to be the narrator of your story. Here, I tell my professional story—a story of a little girl who never wanted to be a teacher, even though I grew up in a family of educators. When thinking about my professional story, there are more highs than lows and even moments that make me feel I defied the odds as a student and woman of color. My trajectory seems to be in contrast to others like me, and by that, I mean like me racially.

THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE TRACKS - HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Growing up on the right side of the tracks literally changed the trajectory of my life. Maybe even saved my life. I grew up in a neighborhood that had a set of railroad tracks that ran right through it. Those tracks were so close that our windows would shake when the train barreled down the tracks. This train was symbolic of the line that I never got to cross, not because of race but because of the perception of the community “over there.” And to add another layer to this community divide, children who lived on the opposite side of the tracks attended a completely different elementary school from those on my side. Now, let's be clear. Even on my side of the tracks, most lived a modest, blue-collar lifestyle. This blue-collar lifestyle benefited from the work of Marian Spencer, who in 1974 was the NAACP Education Committee Chairperson. She undertook the “most important case in the fight for school desegregation in Cincinnati: *Mona Bronson et al. v. Board of Education of the City School District of the City of Cincinnati* in 1974” (University of Cincinnati Libraries, 2026, para. 3).

The work of Marion Spencer promoted the redrawing of district lines and an increase in busing. These results are the root cause of the luck I mentioned earlier. And I now believe that the true name for that luck is more like some sort of spiritual inheritance of all that Mrs. Spencer embodied, because our next move as a family was to a home on a cul-de-sac that had previously been owned by none other than Mr. and Mrs. Donald and Marion Spencer. I spent a decade in that house, but let's return to our original story and home.

Children on my side of the tracks were bused to an elementary school in an affluent neighborhood. This school was a Blue Ribbon award winner. It sat in a beautiful neighborhood surrounded by elegant homes and manicured yards. Children from my neighborhood were the diversity for this school. We were the African-American students bused into a white community. The children on the other side of the tracks were also African-American but attended school in our neighborhood, a school that lacked affluence. It was an underachieving school with minimal support from the community. Even in the present day, the school is home to a student population



that is 76.4% African-American, and 98.8% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged, compared to the school I attended being 20% African-American and 22.9% Economically Disadvantaged (Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, 2024).

I had four African-American teachers who were the prettiest women I had ever seen. I wanted to be Mrs. Flora Kavanaugh because she treated me like I was somebody. She never treated me like I was not deserving to be where I was at that moment in time. She made me feel valued. Unfortunately, I have no memory of what I learned outside of a few isolated experiences. But I do remember how all of my teachers made me feel.

For example, in Mrs. Boatwright's first-grade class, I remember her teaching us how the letter /e/, when placed at the end of a word, "jumps back" and makes the middle vowel say his name. I also remember sitting in Mrs. Walter's fifth-grade class watching the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger. But it wasn't until fourth grade that I, for the first time, felt left out of an opportunity. I was good in school, and school was easy for me. However, I didn't get the letter in the manila envelope like so many others in my class. In that envelope was an invitation to be a part of the QUEST gifted program. I'll never know why I was overlooked, but what I do know is that Mrs. Yvonne Neblitt, an African-American teacher, called my mother and advised her to advocate for my admission into that program. My mother did what she was told, and I got in. I had a successful experience in QUEST, and my mother is forever grateful to Mrs. Neblitt for seeing something in me that others ignored. This situation reinforced my mother's belief that hard work in school did count for something. The part that my mother didn't know was that research consistently shows that teachers of color have higher expectations of students of color, which leads to more students of color being referred to gifted programs (Love, 2018).

The rest of my elementary school career was nothing memorable. I was a good student who didn't get in trouble, so every day was basically the same, just an uneventful blur. I have no memory of the curriculum taught, and I definitely didn't know whether what I was being taught matched what those who lived on the other side of the tracks were taught. Completion of elementary school led to six years in a building that I will always remember.

A GREAT MIDDLE AND A BETTER HIGH, UNTIL THE BUZZ WORE OFF

Middle and high school took place in the same building, a school that was nationally known and recognized for its decades-long track record of success. This school, which was recognized by the College Board and *Newsweek*, allowed me to walk the halls and sit in classrooms as my authentic self. The six years spent in this building were memorable to say the least. It almost felt like the teaching staff got to teach whatever they wanted to teach. There didn't seem to be any mandated learning from the Ohio Department of Education, no need to put I-Can statements and objectives on the board. The script seemed to be original to each teacher. In my Junior year, I took an Ethnic Studies class taught by Joe Yoshimura, and it was then that the curriculum I experienced felt authentic. My teacher had the agency to teach how he wanted to teach and not be worried about any sort of curriculum mandate.

When my high school career came to an end, the next chapter lacked any clear direction. It was in that moment I realized that I lacked any sort of post-secondary plan. Hearing stories from friends made it sound like they had a plan because they worked closely with their high school counselor. My high school counselor was an old white lady who looked like she had been born before college was even invented. I don't think I met with her even once. How did this happen?



How did I end up out in the real world without a plan? My mother has always said, “When you don’t know, you don’t know what to ask.” This could not be truer than it was in that moment because my mother didn’t attend college. She knew nothing about making a plan for college, nor did she know the steps to take to gain admission into a reputable college program. Was this why, in her adult years, she valued learning so much? I’ll never really know, and at that point, it really didn’t matter. I needed a plan. I needed some kind of road map that was going to help me become a productive citizen in society.

THE COLLEGE DROPOUT

With no plan and no money, the only option afforded to me was to stay home and go to the local university. This wasn’t where I wanted to go, but it was what I settled on, and it was the biggest mistake ever. School started in September, and I was back home by December. One would assume I dropped out because it was too hard, but classroom success had nothing at all to do with my decision to drop out. I dropped out because a professor told me I didn’t know how to write. This took all the wind out of my sails because the national teacher of the year, a published author, had been my senior year English teacher. This same national teacher of the year had a research paper named after her, and after you successfully completed the paper, you received a t-shirt commemorating the experience and were given clearance to graduate. There was no way what the university professor was saying was true. But either way, I was crushed and went home to rethink life. Today, I believe that I experienced firsthand what it feels like to be a victim of academic spirit-murdering. “Academic spirit murder signifies that racism and other forms of discrimination have the power to spiritually and emotionally murder and destroy not only people’s dreams but also their very essence and desire to exist” (Revilla, 2021, p. 37).

TIME TO TEACH

Taking time to think and regroup, I did what most black women are expected to do: be strong, pull it together, and move on. Six years after leaving that university, I stepped into my very own classroom. I was responsible for 24 children, but the irony was breathtaking. My first classroom was just 1.6 miles away from where I went to elementary school, and my 24 children had been bused into the community. What an amazing opportunity to empower these young people—a responsibility that I did not take lightly. My principal was supportive but not overbearing, and the only requirement was that I use the Ohio State Standards to design my lessons. There was no script, no pacing guide, no road map. It was freedom to be responsive to my students. It was not easy work, but it felt natural; it felt culturally responsive before that was even a thing.

During my second year of teaching, I took my students to Atlanta, Georgia. This was a big idea, but my principal supported this idea and let me have total control of all of the planning. I had to put together something memorable because this was the first time leaving the State of Ohio for some of my students. We visited the Georgia Aquarium, the World of Coca-Cola, CNN news studio, and four historically Black colleges and universities. While there were no direct curricular ties to this trip, I know learning still took place. Pulling this off with kids from the inner city was something I’ll continue to be proud of because this trip provided exposure to something outside of their front yard. It allowed my students a chance to picture themselves on a college campus or in



a professional career. For once, the ceiling that usually restricts them because of where they come from was removed. I refused to be an educator with authority over children and use that power to tear children down. It was my responsibility not only to open minds but to open the world of possibility to these children. I had no clue that two short years later, I would earn my next degree and move on to administration.

YOU CAN CALL ME PRINCIPAL JORDAN

Becoming an administrator was exciting and scary at the same time. There is no script and no standards to follow. I often thought about how I would know if I were doing the correct thing or not. I remember having a feeling of wanting a safety net, and as my usual luck would have it, not only was there no road map, but I was expected to stand up in front of the entire school and hold an assembly after just three days on the job. Unlike my experience with the horrible professor who provoked me to go home, I nailed it. The feedback received affirmed that I was in the right place at the right time. I established myself as someone with confidence who knew what she was talking about. This was huge because my new job as a first-time administrator was at my former high school—another full circle moment.

Returning to my alma mater, I was acutely aware of the contrast I presented to the established leadership. Being nearly two decades younger than my colleagues and the sole African American on the administrative team, I occupied a space of profound visibility. I recognized that, for many students, I was not just a principal but a mirror. This connection became vital in our high-pressure environment, a school characterized by the fierce pursuit of academic excellence. Because I bridged a gap that age and race had previously left open, students frequently sought me out as a confidant, drawn to a sense of shared identity that softened the edges of an otherwise stressful, competitive atmosphere. This experience was not just beneficial for my students; it prepared me for the next stop on my journey. Working at my alma mater ended up being the last time that I would work in the city, as my next stop took me north to the suburbs.

As someone who has always lived and worked in a city, taking a job in the suburbs was a new experience for me. I walked into this new role with no background knowledge and once again without a script to order my steps. Many would argue about the limitations of a scripted experience, and I believe I can see the value of both sides. But for me, a script has been a safety net or, at the bare minimum, confirmation that I was pointed in the right direction. After seven years in my first suburban experience, I moved to a district that would be described as urban-suburban. It was in this place that I truly got to witness a scripted curriculum and the absence of teacher autonomy.

At my new school, students were placed in Reading classes based on their performance level, not grade. It is a system that prioritizes competency-based progression over chronological age. The instructional environment is lively with student collaboration and teacher-led instruction that happens in small groups. Students present in class with confidence because the learning is on their level. This setup also removes the stigma of retention and more closely mirrors a Montessori-type classroom, where multiple ages are in the same room. My role as the principal was to monitor the delivery of our scripted curriculum and remind teachers of the importance of only using the approved materials. It is important to note that only using approved materials is not synonymous with everyone teaching the same thing at the same time. Using the approved materials was our way of promoting a common language amongst instructors and easing transition if or when an



instructor needs to change groups. The overarching goal is to be rigid in structure but fluid in application.

After more than a decade of using this program, student achievement hit its highest point, four out of five stars on the state report card. While this level of achievement was exciting, why did it take us over a decade to get here? Does this level of achievement really defy the arguments against a scripted curriculum? Powell would suggest that it does not because the result is that “literacy is reduced to mastering a series of decontextualized skills and recalling discrete bits of information. Such managed curricula ultimately deskills teachers by eroding their decision-making authority” (Powell, 2017, p. 110).

How is this possible? I have spent my entire career ensuring I am not a barrier to any student’s growth and success. I have prided myself on being someone who creates opportunities for teachers. I have tried to be transparent in my care for their well-being, not knowing all this time that I may have caused my teachers to feel anger, resentment, and guilt because they were forced to implement this reading program with fidelity.

All that time, I thought I was doing what was right, but was I doing what was easy? I found myself caught in the middle of what I wanted for my students, especially the black and brown ones, and towing the company line. I was holding everyone accountable. That is a good thing, right? To get another perspective on this, I reached out to my network of sister friends.

FRIENDS, BUT MORE LIKE SISTERS

I learned early on that I needed to have authentic professional relationships to really transform the spaces in which I worked. The relationships that I have formed along the way within my journey in education have been very rewarding. I have managed to link arms with six other African American women who give me advice, make me laugh, and show up in all kinds of supportive ways when I need them. Forging relationships is imperative to my social battery because we are often the only people of color in our professional spaces. This affinity group is my safe place.

My friends and I have some common experiences, such as being African American women who have worked in white, affluent school districts, as well as principals who have worked hard to ensure that the state report card that bears each of our names reflects the time and hard work that we have invested in our schools. One of my friends was adamant that a scripted curriculum set the bar extremely low, and this was the reason why her students never experienced any success on the Ohio State Assessments that we are required to administer each spring. She argued that the bar was set so low that, when faced with a higher-level assessment in the area of Reading, the students didn’t stand a chance. They were underprepared. As I listened to my friend, I couldn’t help but reflect on my experiences with curriculum and how this challenged my understanding of what it truly is.

CONCLUSION

Thinking about curriculum through the lens of my own educational journey has highlighted the limitations that are inadvertently placed on teaching and learning. I can admit, there was no script for my Ethnic Studies class, and I flourished. I felt seen, heard, and understood. There was



no script for the trip to Atlanta, Georgia, and all of my students gained something from that experience. The scripted curriculum that exists in education today, to some degree, offers a sense of predictability, but it can also be predictable that a child, specifically a black or brown child, will be invisible in that classroom. A child will be expected to conform to the norms that ignore who they are and where they come from. I now see that it is my duty to encourage my teachers to be vulnerable and see the human side of their students in addition to their blackness. This is how we begin to change the system that has conditioned us, me, to believe the script is comfortably correct.

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