

THE OPPORTUNITIES OF A DECONSTRUCTED CURRICULUM

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Knowledge is power.
I know what I know.
The more you learn,
The farther you'll go.
When you get an education,
You'll be taking a stand.
Knowledge is POWER
Get it while you can!

—Author Unknown¹

The phrase “the children are our future” is cliché. Perhaps those words are most famously recalled by Whitney Houston’s (1985) song, “The Greatest Love of All.” Throughout the video, there are vignettes of a young Whitney auditioning before judges, and they lead to Whitney walking on stage toward her younger self. The images “blend” and mature as Whitney continues to sing. She had an opportunity and grew into her destiny—to be a performer. She was exposed to opportunities that started with her mother, and those opportunities took Whitney to unimaginable heights. I strive to enlighten students about positive academic experiences and a pathway toward vocational or professional careers so they can become aware of the possibilities. Because children are our future, they need the space within the classroom to explore options in life. My outlook on this matter has stemmed from my upbringing and exposure to various modes of learning and experiences. I took those thoughts and experiences into my classroom as a teacher and now in my leadership as an assistant principal. I find opportunities to make students’ learning relevant so they can make informed decisions and find pathways to success.

MY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The nature of my educational experience (Pinar, 1994) included home, church, traditional school, and social experiences. Home was my first place of learning, and it was later that I realized not everyone has the same opportunities. I also realized that there are others who had even more experiences than I. Just as Pinar (1994) described his account of his educational experiences, mine too, are multidimensional. My learning began at home, then church, school, and social experiences. In these environments, I was given many opportunities. My upbringing allowed me to see what the world had to offer. My sister and I traveled to various states and attended plays, musicals, and museums. We took art classes and learned ballet and tap dancing. My mother even enrolled me in a Spanish class as an elementary student as an extracurricular activity. Our parents engaged with us at home, so school was not my only place of learning. We had expectations to get homework done and *read*, or play educational games on the computer, very different from the games available to students today.



The notion that “knowledge is power” is an ideal of the Black community. In Muhammad’s (2020) book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, she noted themes that emerged from Black literacy development, which was established in the 1830s when literary societies began to form (p. 23–27), some 100 years before the Harlem Renaissance. These societies were important as free Blacks in the Northern states needed to navigate life against the atrocities of racism. During that time, another era of intellect took shape. Intelligence was a tangible thought, and I hold it close to me still, passing it on to my children. That power, unbeknownst to me, grew as my education continued.

It didn’t matter if homework was assigned by the teacher or not. If I had weekly spelling words, my father had a task laid out Monday through Thursday to prepare me for the Friday spelling test: Monday—write each word 10 times; Tuesday—write each word in a sentence; Wednesday—use the spelling words to write a story, and Thursday—write the words 10 times again to be ready for a quiz on Thursday night. At the end of each week, I was expected to earn full credit on Friday’s spelling test. If summer was in session or school was on a break, I had to read a book a day, log it, and then write a summary of what I read. By the time I reached fifth grade, I realized not all students had the same expectations that mirrored my home life. I also realized that some students in my classroom worked at different levels. I was in the top reading and spelling groups.

Growing up, I thought the extra work was a burden most of the time, unless I was interested in the book I was told to read. During the summer, I usually didn’t go to summer camp but rather to a church member’s house. They were given instructions that I was not to watch television all day, but I had to read a book and draft a summary of what I read. However, when I became a teacher, I appreciated the care my parents took to nurture my education. I try not to labor my children with the same “learning structure” of my childhood because I don’t want them to feel the same pressure. Yet with similar expectation, I am helping them become participatory citizens who will make a difference in the world.

I expect more out of life because I have been shown how much is available to me. That is how my past educational experience “hovers over [my] present” (Pinar, 2004, p. 21); I want my students to know that the world is open to them if they take advantage of presented opportunities. Because I was able to travel, take lessons, and attend functions, I had space to think of my future and the infinite possibilities ahead. This mindset followed me into the classroom, but I didn’t realize it until I started teaching. I knew sharing the open world with students was imperative. The emphasis on education, at home and socially, set me up for skills that I needed in school, and I knew my ultimate career goal from a young age. I recall riding in the car with my father and telling him I wanted to be the principal of all principals. He corrected me and said the correct title is superintendent of schools. That was all I needed to know. Any person who asked me “*what do you want to be when you grow up?*” I always responded proudly that I wanted to be superintendent of schools. Since I already knew my career path, from elementary school, career exploration was easy for me. I didn’t have to waste time with the career aptitude tests that I had to take at various grade levels. Teachers had to differentiate instruction for me. The road was paved, and I stayed the course. Then, life took a turn, and after a few years of teaching, I became a stay-at-home mom, and I didn’t want to be in education anymore. My interests had changed. During any down time, I began to write and explore other opportunities, but after four years away from the classroom, life took another turn and pushed me back into education and then quickly into administration as an assistant principal.



My second year of teaching was at a charter school in a rural area of west Michigan. The students' backgrounds varied economically and socially. They were great students, behavior wise, and arrived at school ready to work daily. One day, during class (I do not recall the lesson, but we must have been talking about the future and careers—maybe even hopes and dreams), an idea popped into my head. At that moment, I took a break with them. This particular classroom was a computer lab, but it had carpet. Try to imagine some students lying all sorts of ways on the floor, across chairs, or with their heads down on the computer tables, or spread out across the room. I played spa-like music and began to speak in a soft-tone, like the voice you'd hear on a self-help playlist or relaxation video:

Me: Close your eyes and take a deep breath; breathe in and out. Whatever you are worried about or has your focus, let it go and just concentrate on my voice. Think about yourself now. [pause] What is something that you embrace? [pause] What is something you would change?

The pauses were to give students time to reflect and think; it was a process I did not want to rush. I only wanted them to hear their thoughts and background music.

Me: Whatever it is that you embrace right now in your life, would you take it with you? What does that look like for you? Where are you in life in that space? What are you doing? Wherever you are, is it a place that makes you happy?

This exercise continued for about 15 minutes. Though this exercise at the time seemed impromptu, I realize now this what I did as a youth—reflecting on what I did and what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go, and what I wanted to see. Sitting in class, I would think about my future and visualize expectations for my life and all the things that I wanted to achieve. I thought about the possibilities. I was able to do so because I was exposed to adults in my life, at home, church, and social events who were educated too.

DEVELOPING CURIOUS MINDS

Everything I do is for students. The nature of my educational experiences has been a puzzle piece, slowly building the full picture of my professional life (Poetter, 2025). The learning, the doing, and the knowing have been fragments of all sorts that are still building my puzzle. Being able to take those pieces and make improvements along the way when I'm in the position to do more seems to be part of my purpose in life. Because my heart is for students, I want the teachers' hearts to be, too. I think teachers should take personal care in teaching in a way they would if the students were their own child(ren). As an assistant principal, I view my students as my children, or more realistically as my younger siblings or nieces and nephews. During my time at home, I spent four years with my children. My job was inside the home, and I valued it. We filled our days and challenged our curious minds together. Much of the engagement activities followed Montessori methods. We visited library baby programs, museums, parks, and the Cincinnati Zoo. Similarly, students need to have the same age-appropriate opportunities. I take that same kind of love and care into school with me, wanting the absolute best for my students. Since I care for my students and view them as family, I look for ways to offer experiences that could enhance their



lives. At my current school, students attend Girls in Aviation Day (GIA), which is an annual event used to inspire girls to explore the various careers relating to aviation and meet women in those careers, which are typically dominated by men. Additionally, I have delivered various career path experiences for students outside of the classroom, such as field trips, college tours, youth workshops, and expos to help them explore unimagined prospects. Students need to see themselves in positive experiences that lead toward a path of success, raising hope and motivation, so students can make informed decisions about their futures.

Exposure is the most important driving force of my work with students who are considered underrepresented, so I try to shine light on opportunities in and out of school so they can take advantage and fulfill untapped potential. With this, it is also important that I give students space to take advantage of what is offered, designed to advance their education and employment skills. This may support students to see themselves in advanced places, discover positive pathways of success, and raise hope and motivation in them to return to school with a renewed spirit for themselves and their futures. My goal is never to force students to attend college, as some may choose another avenue, but rather to learn what more is available in this world. I hold this mindset for all students, even those who already have access to opportunities.

One thread of the school is to encourage students, holding them to higher expectations. Students attempt to reach the level they are told they can achieve, and they need accountability to attain that level. Curiosity is another way students can take accountability. Humans are innately curious and that can sometimes get confused with “being nosy” (Ostroff, 2016, p. 21). In the case of the classroom, being curious is great. It is an ideal that brings knowledge to students because they are in search of answers. George Benard Shaw (as quoted in Ostroff, 2016) said, “What we want to see is the child in pursuit of knowledge, not the knowledge in pursuit of the child” (p. 1).

One of the easiest ways to introduce students to future opportunities is in the classroom is through the equity framework of Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020, 2023), which allows students to engage in the curriculum using what she calls pursuits. The five pursuits she outlines are identity, skill, intellect, criticality, and joy. Each of these pursuits is an element of an unscripted curriculum and allows all students to positively connect with the curriculum. To fully engage in the lesson, students ought to be able to relate the lesson to themselves (identity). Learners can express what they know about the surrounding world, their own personal know-how, to complete a task. This allows pupils to think about their connectivity to the world around them—including their immediate environment, which is school, and what they have to offer as citizens. Students should be able to find pleasure in learning because they view the information as valuable and useful. Joy can be found because teachers are using various modes of instruction, through engaging conversation and activities, to help students acquire knowledge (Olovson, 2025, p. 2).

Ostroff (2016) agrees that curiosity is critical to student success in school. Teachers have the power to “nurture” that curiosity (Ostroff, 2016, p. 7). School itself is an exploration. Students explore because they are curious. Aristotle claimed that the desire to know is among the deepest human urges. Whether that exploration is in the woods, an attic, back of a closet, or in the classroom, learning takes place. Especially in high school, all the courses are introductions to discover student interests that will carry them into their future careers. Cross-curricular instruction should be utilized by adding career explorations that make the teaching even better. Students need to know how a particular lesson (or unit) can be useful in their future, or someone’s future; students need to know the purpose of what is being taught; they need to understand the why and how. Why am I learning this? How will this help me in life? Answering those questions helps build engagement, which brings joy, the fifth pursuit mentioned above. It is what keeps a student awake



and keeps life in the classroom. After elementary school, some classrooms lose the spirit of zeal/zealousness. The way school has been done in the higher grades is often very rigid because the pleasure (joy) is not found in the classroom; even the color is gone. In an elementary classroom, color brings joy and happiness (Muhmmad, 2023, p. 57). If you were to compare an elementary classroom room to a high school classroom, the brighter colors would be found at the lower grade levels. My classrooms had spurts of bright color that popped against the serene décor and earthy vibes to bring a sense of calmness to the atmosphere. Within that environment, I helped students feel calm, so they could focus and feel free to learn.

Teachers who remain curious keep their students curious too (Ostroff, 2016, p. 21). Those who do “play a critical role in helping students transform their curiosity into inquiry” (Ostroff, 2016, p. 6), even if that curiosity is based off wondering what their students are thinking. Teachers can take that thinking and dive deeper into a lesson for students to explore and connect to the world, thus, increasing the takeaway that students can carry into in their future. Deeper dives don’t happen with scripted curriculums.

UPCYCLING EDUCATION

As a learner, the curriculum pushes me to challenge the current curriculum model and gain experience in each position I take. Scripted curriculums are stilted. Districts that do not maintain pace with the changing world deteriorate in enrollment, the quality of teachers, and funding. So many districts have used the phrase, 21st century learner. How can a student be a 21st century learner when the teacher is of the 19th century? Recycling the lesson is no good—that’s laziness. Upcycling the lesson is the way to go. Being curious is thinking outside the box. If the teacher wants to reuse a lesson, they should evaluate how it was delivered, how students responded, and if the expected outcome was achieved.

Though I did not major in biology, I remember learning about Punnett Squares the most. I like learning about genetic traits and how dominant and recessive traits form. The body takes various traits from the male and female and aligns them into four options, one of which manifests to what is seen on the body, such as hair texture and color. If my teacher had introduced professions that work with genetics, I may have found a place in the world, but the math made me run away. Teachers could assign a profession to a small group to research. Students could connect their learning collaboratively to the greater world (Ostroff, 2016, p. 42).

People need to “unimpose” (I made that word up), meaning take the away the barriers, so they can change. Teachers would probably enjoy teaching and maybe not experience burnout (politics of education notwithstanding) because students would have too much fun to misbehave out of boredom. It is time for the classroom and districts to shake it up. Thinking outside of the box can lead to innovation; completing an in-service or student teaching semester can really make or break that hopeful teacher. This open mindset of an unscripted curriculum followed me into the classroom. As a young teacher, I appreciated the teacher textbooks with varied teaching strategies, real-world connections, technology integrations, and life skill suggestions to get me started. But if I used those, it was only for suggestions. I believed there was more that could be done within the classroom—finding ways to connect students’ world to the lessons—without being beholden to the textbook.

During my first year at a southwest Michigan school, I was hired to teach business and English classes. This job was also my first public school teaching experience. Prior to that, I taught



at two charter schools. Being new to the school and district, I did not have prior knowledge of the English department as being unfriendly. Though I was one of the younger teachers in my department, I did not fit in with the other youthful teachers who had already been friends. It did not matter, though, since I tend to bond with those more seasoned than me, so I quickly made friends with Melissa and Nancy. They informed me of the difficulties that lay ahead within that English department, knowing I would be challenged as an “outsider.”

A particular assignment was shared across the department for the English 10 classes. In one of my English 10 sections, a Special Ed teacher would sit with her student every day to assist him. This particular teacher also happened to be friends with the department co-head and tattled to her that I did not follow the assignment as the department intended. I opted for a different route because I did not want to follow a scripted curriculum. I prefer looking for more engaging ways for students to show what they know, instead of always relying on a worksheet or traditional assessment (quiz or test). My chosen differentiation was not welcome. Both co-chairs of the English department requested a meeting with me. They met in my room during my prep. I had a feeling, thank you Holy Spirit, that it was not going to be a good one, so I was prepared to hold my tongue, and I recorded the meeting in the event I needed a reference. The meeting I recall was arduous, as it was disrespectful and demeaning to my intellect.

In the end, I was told to follow their “rules” so that all students were receiving the same content. I would like to pause here and state that students *did* receive the same content, but I chose to deliver the lesson in a more engaging way that would allow students to be curious and ask questions. I don’t know if the problem was really me not following their scripted curriculum or if my intellect caused them to feel threatened. At the end of the year, one of those co-chairs wrote me an email of apology, acknowledging that her treatment of me was undue and thanked me for my unreciprocated kindness. That experience taught me to stand firm in my convictions, challenge the typical, and do what is best for students’ learning. I took liberties in the name of educational freedom (Love, 2019), so my students could thrive in their education. Great strides can be found in the freedom of education if students are given space to be curious, ask questions, and dig deep into their learning.

I don’t feel impactful enough in my current assistant principal position to challenge the status quo, yet. To do that, I would have to be a leader in the curriculum department. If I were able to spend more time as an instructional leader, my challenges would begin at the central office level with the curriculum department. I would push the concept that children are our future. I would find ways to improve the curriculum and encourage teachers to adapt the curriculum with their own research, insight, and activities. I truly believe that adding career and outside world connections would strengthen students learning. Following this new direction would open the door for students to discover the world in a safe place before leaving the “educational nest.”

Educators in my district have completed the training with Dr. Gholdy Muhammad and her staff. We were given her books to read and then completed training sponsored by the state department of education. A small group of teacher leaders within my building have even presented on the 5 Pursuits throughout the school year but were only challenged to start with one pursuit; that seems fair since the concept was new to everyone. However, the learning for teachers could have been more impactful if a sample lesson had been given to the whole group, modeling how the 5 Pursuits should be used in the classroom and how it could look in various subjects, while including career exploration.

In my district, our secondary program is the shining star. Students can enroll in early college courses while still in high school (dual enrollment) during their 12th and 13th year of high



school. After that 13th year, those students would graduate with a high school diploma and an associate's degree. The early college courses are taught by professors from the local community college. Additionally, some students choose to attend the vocational academy for part of the day and learn a trade. My district also has an aviation program that leads to a pilot's license. If career exploration was added consistently across the high school curriculum, so many more students who don't have plans to attend a four-year university could graduate from high school certified in a trade. Students who did plan to attend a four-year university could have an easier time selecting their college major.

As an educator, it is my goal—and perhaps my mission—to help students. Everything I do is for them. If students have the space to explore their learning and think about how their dreams can become a reality, we must let them lead the way. This mindset is a pressure that I have placed upon myself: challenging the current curriculum model, trying to be inclusive in teaching and broad in the theory of being curious to expose students to opportunities that would benefit their future selves. I believe that children *are* our future; if we teach them well, they *can* lead the way.

NOTES

1. I recall singing this song in Mrs. Rebecca Stewart's music class at Sing Sing Elementary School. I'm uncertain if she was the author. It has stuck with me, and it is so true.

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