Express Yourself: Using Self-Expression in Forms of Poetry, Storytelling, and Visual Arts to Share What Antiracist and Antibias Education Look, Sound, and Feel Like

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Abstract

The impetus for this article is to share one family's understanding of what antiracist and antibiased education looks, sounds, and feels like. Through different forms of expression, including poetry, storytelling, and illustrations, this Black family's voice captures perspectives of students and parents, each being essential stakeholders to essential discussions about race and biases in education. The article is a personal and conversational piece where responses highlight each person's view of what antiracist education looks, sounds, and feels like across different levels of education. Afterward, concluding thoughts about what this work means for mathematics educators and researchers are shared.

Discussion And Reflection Enhancement (DARE) Pre-Reading Questions

1. What do you remember feeling or doing when you saw the video of George Floyd being killed?
2. Do you have children, friends, or students who had to have “The Talk” about what to do when encountering police?
3. Have you had the experience of turning a very negative experience into positive motivation to make important changes?
4. Have you found ways to draw from your family’s wisdom and experiences to inform your teaching?

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Introduction

Racial matters remain a signature part of the American experience. Issues of race and racism, biases, and discrimination, including racial disparities, are all still ever-present. These matters are not aberrant to American life. In fact, they arguably took center stage, on May 25, 2020, when the world witnessed Derek Chauvin, a White police officer kneeling on the neck of George Floyd, a Black man, killing him. The actions of a White man kneeling on the neck of a Black man, extinguishing his life source, in many ways epitomized the racial experiences of Black people living in America. Furthermore, the centuries of killings of Black people at the hands of White people have become all too familiar, resulting in uprisings across the globe and, with this recent killing, reigniting global debates about race and racism. Many people of all races cried out for changes in what is currently an unfair race-based system. From the young to the old, Mr. Floyd's death prompted activism, a call to action, and conversations about working toward a more just and equitable society. For my family, the unconscionable murder of Mr. Floyd was heart-wrenching to watch. Everyone in my household felt hopeless. The anguish we felt was rooted in an awareness that Mr. Floyd's death was not the first of its kind and would unfortunately not be the last. As a Black family, the hurt was deep. We understood that what happened to George Floyd could have happened to any of the four Black males in our family. This awareness, of course, helps set the tone of our positionality and subjectivities for this article. Our subjectivities proliferate from our life experiences as Black Americans, as parents of Black children, as Black college students, as a Black high school student, as a Black woman educator, as a Black youth, as Black women, and as Black men in the United States.

As our family talked through the different feelings and emotions, we experienced from seeing Mr. Floyd's murder-- hurt, grief, and focused anger-- we found ourselves thinking about how education must play a key role in dismantling what we saw. As an educator, I thought clearly about the key differences that set Mr. Floyd and his killer apart but settled on one similarity: George Floyd and his killer both went through the U.S. education system. With this commonality in mind, I started to question how educators can make a difference in educating future generations of people to be racially civil and socially just human beings. I called on my family to help me design a course that would help prepare teachers in ways that engage them in thinking about activist teaching. It was my way of getting the family to collectively bring about change while working through our emotions. We worked together on a course description while watching memorial services for Mr. Floyd. I remember us pausing on the work for the course description and standing for the number of minutes and seconds the police officer pinned George's neck to the cement road. I remember sobbing uncontrollably with my children's arms around me and those on the phone telling me everything would be ok. I remembered my son, AmunRa's words piercing my soul when he captured part of my feelings and fear that this could have easily happened to any of the Black men in my life, my three sons, husband, brothers, friends, and loved ones. I remember each day like it was yesterday. Through the tears, we continued our work on designing the course to include objectives, assignments, readings, and discussions. It was essential to get the family's input because they mattered, their Black lives matter, and it would be necessary to discuss how to get it right in education. We came up with many different titles and eventually settled on "Teaching as Activism." The overarching design of the course was centered on the rationale that antiracist and antibias work in all schools is essential. Such teachings, we felt, would move educators to an active and committed role of examination of all aspects of schooling, not just in the classroom. So recently, when a colleague shared a link to the call for submissions for this *TEEM* special issue addressing antiracist and antibias practices in mathematics education,

I asked my children and husband to revisit 2020 and all their lived experiences within mathematics education and, for the purposes of this article, engage in a self-expression activity that would answer what antiracist and antibias education means to them.

As a mathematics education research scholar, I understand the inherent value of the role self-expression plays in combating traumatic racial experiences. Each person's self-expression about antiracist and antibias ideas, concepts, and practices, and the overall message of this work reminds us of the critical work ahead to reclaim our strength and change our perspectives about education. Three of my four children, Askia, Asaru, and Akenti, contributed to the content of the article, while one, AmunRa, assisted with editing and suggesting improvements for the final draft. Since this was to be completed as a family, my husband joined in to give a parental view. Together, their contributions help to bring a much-needed perspective to education, that of the Black family. Sharing our perspectives about antiracist and antibias educational practices is an important part of our learning journey and reminds us that self-expression is profoundly powerful and political. Through self-expression, we often discover that even in our unique experiences, there is a commonality in the voices of historically marginalized populations. As one tenet of critical race theory describes it, the unique voices of People of Color reflect their histories and experiences with oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Antiracist and antibias education calls for an end to oppressive learning. Our uniqueness in expressing what that type of education looks, sounds, and feels like is a start to knowing and understanding what is required. So, it is within the ideology of unique voices of people of color that this article of shared experiences from a Black family articulate self-expressions of personal dispositions as productive points about the educational spectrum. We invite readers of this article to reflect on their perspectives about antiracist and antibias education to see what is different and similar. First, the perspectives of the children are shared, followed by a parental viewpoint. Afterward, concluding thoughts about what these self-expressions suggest for mathematics educators and researchers are shared.

Antiracist and Antibias Education: The Perspectives of the Children

Askia: To share what antiracist teaching in mathematics education looks, sounds, and feel like across PreK-12, Askia expressed himself with this reflection, followed by his original poem. The oldest of my children, Askia is now in college and reflected on his prior schooling:

> It looks like Neapolitan ice cream, diverse and inclusive of different colors representing the mathematical contributions of people from around the world and sounds like jazz filled with improvisation and passion. Simply put, antiracist and antibias teachings in the mathematics classroom feel like truth. But unfortunately, for me, throughout my PreK-12 years and even into college, my mathematics experiences all looked like vanilla ice cream filled with Whitewashed toppings. Even though I excelled in my math classes and was always at least two grade levels ahead in high school, taking courses such as Pre-calculus and AP Calculus, it was very difficult to stay engaged because I always felt missing. I would always wonder why people that looked like me were not in the textbooks. Where was the representation? I knew there were Black mathematicians and scientists from all over the world. I knew of them because my parents taught me about them. However, that didn't help when those Black mathematicians and scientists clearly weren't in the text. The text was supposed to be the place where the knowledge and the contributors of the knowledge were. So, the absence of Black mathematicians and scientists from the texts, conversations, and images, for me, suggested that Black people were not thought of as holders of mathematics knowledge and ultimately contributors of that knowledge. I remember thinking about other students and wondering what if their education wasn't being supplemented at home? Those students will never think of Black people as mathematicians. The following poem I wrote helps to capture the essence of my experience in mathematics classrooms:

educational flatlines
waste no time
leaving a people of culture and grace
disgraced
curriculum neglects to
resurrect the real legends
instead aims to wash away any color from our lessons
leading us to feel there's no point paying attention
end up learning more about ourselves in detention
while teachers still give out stolen theories without truth
like crediting Greeks when Egyptians had been using square roots
now just imagine if our kids' minds were flattered
with a lesson that showed what they're truly capable of
mapping out cities using the stars above
now we get beat down, shot down, erased
imagine if we knew ourselves
would this take place
went from pyramids to chains and links
unlawfully arrested riding in a back seat
creating formulas and building temples
to be cast out in school and labeled as a rebel
told we weren't good at math
or made to believe it
now we don't even try
no thoughts to achieve it
I've seen it
witnessed a classroom fade out to black
when the math ensued
lost without a clue
but were we given any choices?
the world tries to tell our story
like we don't have any voices
and the system shuts us down
afterward for silly choices
or just being [black]
could've avoided all this pain
if our pride was intact

Asaru: For Asaru, now a college student, answering the question of what antiracist teaching practices for the mathematics classroom look, sound, and feel like across PreK-12, he reflected on his middle school experience. Asaru shared the following:

> I [Asaru] am glad I was asked this question and can speak about the importance of antiracist teaching. I feel like more students should be asked the question and speak out about their schooling experience. When I was in middle school, my math teacher doubted my ability to advance to a higher level of mathematics. I was a 7th-grade student, and I was performing at high levels of mathematics, as I did throughout my schooling, and when I got to the 7th grade, my teacher questioned whether I could "do" the 9th-grade math, which at the time was advanced algebra. Never mind the countless test scores indicating my proficiency, nor my clear understanding of the subject. All that mattered to my teacher was that she didn't think a young Black male in the 7th-grade could complete a curriculum that was two years above his grade level. I remembered feeling hurt and angry that my teacher was not supportive and encouraging. She had access to my transcript and could see that I was always advanced in my mathematics performance. Of course,

she tested and retested me to convince herself of my scores, and I was rightfully placed in the 9th-grade advanced algebra course. Coupled with my memory of this experience, is also realizing that I was one of the only 7th-grade Black males in the 9th-grade class amongst other non-Black students. Unfortunately, my teacher's attitude was hardly an individual instance. Instead, it resulted from Eurocentric and biased education that has fostered systemic and unchecked subjective views towards students of color. Now, as a junior at a predominantly White university, where less than 2% of the students are Black, the consequences of those systemic racial biases are even more evident. Given my 7th grade experience, I often wonder how many students of color have been negatively impacted by the biased views of that teacher and countless others. Could such ideas be responsible for the small percentage of students of color on my college campus? What educational experiences, systematic or otherwise, historically minoritized students might have had that hampers their presence on university campuses? If education is at the forefront of change in youth, then education has a moral responsibility to address the failures of the past, eliminating the possibility of mistakes being repeated. This can be done through antiracist and antibias teachings. We know education has an impact that goes far beyond a student's PreK-12 academic years and even into college. Students carry their experiences with them into their careers and livelihood. Take, for example, that while in high school, I studied and completed my associate's degree in business management. The positive educational experiences I had while completing my associate's degree continue to influence me in many ways. I currently major in international business at my university. Because of my associate's degree, I have even managed to secure paid internships with job offers upon my graduation. My example suggests that if more Black students have positive experiences during their PreK-12 mathematics education, perhaps it would translate into more Black students taking up mathematics in college. Therefore, antibias education must be at the forefront of a classroom's focus. Such as to equip students with the tools to permeate racially-biased structures within education. Antiracist education for all students, particularly the teaching and learning of mathematics, which is considered a gatekeeper, should empower students to change society for the better. Preparing students in the mathematics classroom to thrive in an increasingly diverse community should be the prevailing priority for the foreseeable future. Thus, antiracist and antibias education in the mathematics classroom should look like cooperation, sound like respectful discourse, and feel like justice.

Akenti: The youngest of the siblings, Akenti was a junior in high school at the time of this writing. In expressing what antiracist mathematics education looks, sounds, and feels like across PreK-12, Akenti drew an illustration (see Figure 1). The drawing depicts the struggle of students of color who face biased teachings in mathematics classrooms. The black band with math symbols over the students' eyes represents how the students' identity is continuously stripped because of racist curriculum and instruction from teachers who teach with racial biases. Notably, the teacher in the back also has the black band over his eyes to depict that he, too, is blinded by his own bias.

Figure 1

Drawing by high school student Akenti.

Racially-biased teachings can hinder the engagement and performance of students of color, resulting in race-based disparities in academic performance within schools. The above drawing, which shows the lackluster approach to learning mathematics, captures the feeling of far too many students of color who feel left out of the curriculum. For Akenti, antiracist and antibias education in the mathematics classroom looks like allowing students of color to express their culture in the classroom, sounds like including the contributions to the study and practice of mathematics from ancestors of people of color, and feels like students of color being listened to and understood.

Antiracist and Antibias Education: A Parental Viewpoint

Michael: For over two decades, Michael has been working with his four Black children to ensure that they receive a high-quality education. So, when asked for his perspective both as a father and as a Black man about what antiracist teaching in mathematics education looks, sounds, and feels like, Michael stated the following:

> So, as a parent, I [Michael] work with my children to help them navigate a Eurocentric education system, including their mathematics curriculum. As my parents and their parents before them, I was intentional about teaching my children antiracist ways. Meaning, I made sure to expose my children to expansive works of African people from throughout the diaspora. It was vital for me to teach my children that they were works of greatness and came from great people. This action that I took as part of teaching and learning with my children is, in itself, the action of antiracist education. I am well aware that the view that dominates current mathematics texts, curriculum, and instruction omits great African mathematicians from any significant contribution to mathematics. For example, images, information, examples, depictions, and mentioned contributors of mathematics knowledge are often White Western Europeans. As a result, the rich historical mathematical legacy of Black people around the world and their contributions to both scientific and natural mathematics are readily absent in mathematics and mathematics education. This omission of the contribution was significant for many reasons, but the two reasons that stand out the most are (i) truth and (ii) representation. Based on personal research, I knew that Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) were, and still are, great contributors to the field of mathematics. Therefore, to challenge Western views of mathematics that minimize Black people from the history of mathematics, I would regularly highlight for my children some of the mathematical contributions that Black people made around the world. This list of African contributors to mathematics was not exhaustive. Still, it did help to tell a broader narrative of Black mathematicians from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and around the world. I would tell my children about contributions to the field of mathematics from the great Egyptians and pyramids, Dogons and architecture, Imhotep and architecture, Mayans and the understanding of the number zero, and Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Fullani al Kishnawi, who worked on Magic Squares, to the more famous Benjamin Banneker a self-taught astronomer, mathematician, and surveyor of Washington D.C. and to all those less known and unknown who were missing from my children's textbooks. This omission of diverse people is dangerous and an enemy of the truth. It leaves students, particularly BIPOC students, without representation, and the message sent is that they are not capable of being scientists and mathematicians. Education should be an equitable and just experience for all. Antiracist and antibias education in the mathematics classroom will require truth-telling. It should look like students engaged in critical thinking about and with mathematics, sound like teachers and students sharing knowledge from diverse peoples and perspectives, and feel boundless.

What Can Mathematics Educators Take Away From the Experiences of This Black Family?

The self-expressions and lifted voices of this Black family remind us that as mathematics educators, we cannot remove ourselves from crucial debates about race and racism in classrooms. Nor can we remove ourselves from the history of biased mathematics teaching, mainly since there is a great need to address race-based disparities in academic performances that have historical groundings (Dennis, 2021; Ohito, 2021). As I share their expressions of what antiracist and antibias mathematics look, sound, and feels like I couldn't help but think of the numerous Black families across the United States who share similar experiences. So, thinking about what's next and the 'so what' factor, the words "transformative practices" come to mind. Each family member's expressed viewpoint calls for a change in how we educate our youth in mathematics. Askia's poem, which was primarily centered on the need to see and feel represented in mathematics education, called on mathematics teacher educators (MTEs) and researchers to continue to assist classroom teachers in identifying ways to create classroom environments supportive of diversity in the mathematics content. MTEs and researchers should increase their collaborations with PreK-12 schools and facilitate conversations to help teachers learn ways to support students' identities in ways that make classrooms safe for students to be themselves fully (Aguirre et al., 2013). The joint work should include an intentional focus on how mathematical problem

solving is reflective of everyday lives, especially those of marginalized people.

Asaru's negative 7th-grade mathematics experience invites an examination of the hidden curriculum and practices at schools relating to race, racism, systemic oppression, indifference, inequality, culture, and lack of access. Thus, MTEs should work with schools to promote ethical and just behaviors for positive mathematics classroom culture and teacher responsibility to effect progressive change. This work with schools should assist teachers in seeing antiracist and antibias curriculum as their own journey in dismantling racism and implicit biases that work to keep Black students from excelling. Examinations of school practices, both explicit and implicit, should be conducted to correct and develop curricular materials and techniques that dissect approaches to solving complex problems leading to the creation of safe classroom spaces where all PreK-12 students could thrive (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Such work would afford teachers with opportunities to reflect on and formulate personal, anti-deficit philosophy as to their role as an antiracist and antibias educators in providing safe spaces within the classroom for all students.

Akenti's illustration also demonstrates that more collaborative work between MTE, researchers, and PreK-12 schools is needed to address implicit biases. Her artwork makes clear that in many cases, both teachers and students are blinded by their implicit biases, which they bring with them into the mathematics classrooms causing students to become disengaged. Therefore, collaborative work with educators to challenge teachers' implicit biases should include an invitation for teachers to keep a journal for potential conversations. Students could do journal writing or quick-writes as springboards for conversations that lead to a more informed mathematics classroom, one where students increase empathy and take on current socio-cultural, political, and economic issues to become more active participants in society (Jez, 2020; Novak, 2021). Unlike what is seen in Akenti's illustration, mathematics classrooms should look productive, busy, and responsive, with students engaged in mathematics in ways that work toward a socially just society.

The views expressed by the children in this article about what antiracist and antibias practices in mathematics classrooms look, sound, and feel like suggest that they want mathematics spaces to sound like a full-range choir with diverse voices and tones. The children want the mathematics classroom to be filled with inquiring minds that clamor for truth, for students to feel critically empathetic, and given opportunities to support positive changes. This type of inquiry-based, empathetic, and supportive mathematics classroom would be more easily achieved with the intentional involvement of parents from historically marginalized groups (Marrun et al., 2021). When we consider the invested work Michael did with his children, we must think of the value Black parents, as important stakeholders, bring to the teaching and learning experiences. Inviting Black parents into PreK-12 classrooms as collaborators presents a more diversified approach to teaching and learning mathematics as Black parents bring with them their lived experiences, diverse thinking, knowledge, and approaches. This type of collaboration is not new, as it is often seen in reading and language arts courses where parents are invited for "story time" or "reading time."

Understandably, parental involvement in children's reading is considered instrumental in encouraging children to become readers and plays a fundamental part in increasing children's interest in learning to read. Thus, a similar approach in mathematics classrooms would be beneficial (TODOS, 2020). Inviting historically underrepresented and marginalized groups such as Black parents into the mathematics classroom should be a welcome approach to building and sustaining students' interest in mathematics while creating a more inclusive and experiential learning environment. The presence of Black parents as contributors to mathematics instruction would help position and develop Black children as mathematics thinkers, knowers, and doers. The collaborative work between mathematics teachers and Black parents can lead to safe yet brave and informed ways of how to begin antiracist and antibiased conversations as teachers introduce math lessons. Parents can also assist teachers with utilizing those safe yet courageous and necessary conversations as informal assessments of the curriculum, course content, and students' learning experiences. Thus, a call to action from Black parents to MTE and researchers becomes finding ways to further explore how schools and Black families could work together to provide a richer understanding and appreciation of teaching and learning with students in antiracist and antibias ways.

Concluding Thoughts

In discussing race and racism within U.S. public schools and strategies for effective changes, education policymakers and teacher education programs need to meaningfully consider input from the families of PreK-12 Students of Color (Marrun et al., 2021). These expressions and experiences from the perspective of students and parents, all important stakeholders, invite us all to (re)examine how current mathematics curriculum and instruction perpetuate negative race-based educational experiences for Black children and the need for antiracist and antibias teachings. Shared stories and experiences are critical pieces that help us engage with race and racism (Chioneso, 2020; Pitts, 2017).

The lived realities, personal stories, and activism can provide ideas to improve students' everyday experiences in our mathematics classrooms. Take, for example, Asaru's experience, which is far too familiar. The teacher's framing of his mathematics ability, if left unchallenged, could have harmed his mathematics trajectory and eventual post-secondary experience. Many education researchers posit that teacher-student relational interactions mediate student access to mathematics content (see Battey et al., 2016; Stipek, 2006). Teachers' relational interactions speak to the quality of instruction that seeks to affirm students' mathematics ability and help move students to a more sophisticated understanding of mathematics. Whether through addressing behavior, framing mathematics ability, acknowledging student contributions, or attending to culture and language, teachers help to shape the mathematics trajectory for their students (Aguirre et al., 2013). Given this importance and challenge of creating and sustaining positive teacher relational interactions, calling on teachers to teach in antiracist and antibias ways is a necessary start; otherwise, far too many students could have negative schooling experiences such as the one Asaru described. To rise further to the challenge of counteracting negative race-based experiences, teachers will have to unpack historically dominant practices and processes in mathematics education for a more equitable approach to the teaching and learning with their PreK-12 students.

In closing, we assumed that readers of this article are committed to helping students learn and thrive in the mathematics classroom. Therefore, in lifting our voices in the form of poetry, storytelling, and illustration, we hope that readers explore, critically, ways to enact the look, sound, and feel of antiracist and antibias teachings for the mathematics classroom.

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