

“DEAR GOD, AT WHAT A COST” TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF HISTORICALLY BLACK EDUCATION

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The title of this essay is a quote from W.E.B. DuBois' article, "Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?" published in 1935. The article was published in the *Journal of Negro Education* as Black communities debated whether it was better for Black children to attend underfunded, overcrowded, and dilapidated Black schools, or racially mixed schools with more resources and better facilities. Although Black schools were fiscally challenged, Black children were nurtured by caring teachers and embraced by their classmates. On the other hand, the racially mixed schools were often cold and dehumanizing. DuBois writes:

It's difficult to think of anything more important for the development of a people than a proper training for their children, and yet I have repeatedly seen wise and loving colored parents take infinite pains to force their children into schools where the white children, white teachers, and white parents despised and resented the dark child, made mock of it, bullied it, and literally rendered it a living hell. Such parents want their children to "fight" this thing out, but dear God, at what a cost . . . the result of the experiment may be complete ruin of character, gift, and ability and ingrained hatred of schools and men.¹

Throughout his expansive career as a public intellectual, DuBois was persistently concerned about the well-being and flourishing of Black people, particularly Black children. DuBois has the prophetic fire of Black liberation theology as well as a keen eye for the hopeful ideals of educational philosophy. Drawing deeply from many wells—poetry, literature, economics, politics, religion, and music—DuBois uses his training as a sociologist to bear witness to and for Black folks under the pressures of racial apartheid.

What has been most striking to me lately about DuBois' work is his concern for *children*. Black children, unfortunately, fall in the crack somewhere between liberation theology and philosophy of education. As an alumnus of Union Theological Seminary, which sits directly

1 → W.E.B. DuBois, "Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?" *The Journal of Negro Education* 4, no. 3 (1935): 328. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2291871>.

across from Teachers College, Columbia University at Broadway and 120th, I see their physical locations as a metaphor for how close yet incredibly distant they are in theory and praxis. There is a theological seminary preparing leaders for the church and society, and I have been *standing* on the same corner for the past ten years, long enough to know that these institutions, so incredibly close, are a world apart. Liberation theologians rarely consider children in their analyses of systems of oppression, and philosophers of education rarely consider Black children as they imagine the lofty possibilities of schooling. Within these fields of practice, Black and Brown children are left without advocates and voices.

What do liberation theologians and philosophers of education have to say to each other? Two disciplines with their own foundational thinkers, vocabularies, and concepts, yet their aims are similar. Liberation theologians and educators are both committed to enhancing one's quality of life through learning, flourishing, and well-being. In this essay, I explore the possibility of a cross-fertilization between the two disciplines by reflecting on my own experience serving as an ordained Baptist Pastor while earning a Ph.D. in Philosophy and Education at Teachers College.

BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Black Liberation Theology finds its starting point in the struggle for freedom from slavery in the United States. This distinct religious tradition has been preserved through the preaching, worship, and social witness of Black churches and communities that continue to fight for justice and claim humanity in a land that does not "love [Black] flesh."² I grew up listening to the sermons and speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Malcolm X, and Fannie Lou Hamer. Their messages were filled with prophetic rage, urgency, and unbridled Black pride. That sense of passion led me to Union Theological Seminary where I met a man who told me all about myself. James Cone, credited as the father of the academic discipline of Black Liberation Theology, was my systematic theology professor. Cone's work opened the space for other theological voices to emerge from the margins.

2 → Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004).

Black Liberation Theology comes out of the Black experience, and it looks suffering in the face and dares to give it a voice. Black liberation theologians and practioners shed light on the oppression of Black people, Black women, Black LGBTQ folk, and non-binary and gender non-conforming siblings with the hope that we will make room for all of God's children at the table. After three years of seminary, I became interested in philosophy of education. Black Liberation Theology's focus on suffering left me more often angry than hopeful. Philosophy of education is a bit different from Black Liberation Theology, in the sense that it turns our attention towards imagining new possibilities. However, the conversations always felt a bit detached from my world as a minister in Harlem. For the past five years, I've experienced my own double-consciousness—an internal conflict—being a student of Black liberation theology on one hand and a student of philosophy of education on the other; a graduate student and a minister. I have always wondered what it would be like to bring two of my loves together for a conversation. What would it be like to introduce these two worlds to each other?

What do liberation theology and philosophy of education have to say to each other? A dialogue between liberation theologians and philosophers of education can lead to a fruitful conversation that transforms the death-wrenching culture of classrooms into life-affirming experiences. Here are three suggested topics for the dialogue. First, liberation theologians should identify the scenes of violence and suffering in classroom experiences.

I. BLACK SUFFERING IN SCHOOL

I have served as a full-time minister throughout my graduate school career. Many days, I rushed out of seminars to make it back to The Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem to cover my ministerial duties. While riding in a cab from Teachers College to the church, I would often try to connect the dots between my studies and ministry while staring out the window looking at children leaving school in their Success Academy uniforms. In a 2018 article published in *The City University of New York Law Review*, J.D. Candidate Mikaila Carwin reports that charter schools' discipline Black students more than they

discipline any other race. Charter school networks have resorted to the “broken windows” theory of discipline, immediately policing negative behavior as a form of correction. Success Academy is one of several urban charter school networks that has come under fire because of its “zero-tolerance” policy that disciplines students for minor infractions as simple as raising their hand improperly, an untucked shirt, or eyes drifting away from the teacher.³ Punishments include demerits, loss of privileges, detention, suspension, and expulsion for small offenses. The zero-tolerance policies in classroom management mirror the broken windows approach to policing in the streets—a form of community control that overtly targets Black and Brown people.

But if Black Liberation Theology is confined to the church and philosophy of education is overly focused on ideals and possibilities, who will give voice to Black children who are suffering? Who will stop along the way to call these practices evil? Who will ring the alarm and call these school leaders out for the anti-Black practices? Black students are disciplined, suspended, and expelled at higher rates than white students.

No-excuses charter schools are sites of anti-Black violence, and they crucify the souls of Black children day after day. In that same essay, DuBois evokes the theological term “crucifixion” to describe how Black children were harshly mistreated in school where they were admitted and tolerated but not embraced or affirmed.⁴ Today, no-excuses schools perpetuate a racial caste system that prepares Black and Brown children to become docile, mindless bodies who lack the ability to challenge the status quo. No-excuses charter schools do not regard parents as partners in their children’s education. Most parent engagement at no-excuses schools centers around disciplinary infractions. Golann, Debs, and Weiss record an incident where a parent hung up the phone in frustration after she was informed that her sixth-grade daughter would be benched (in-school suspension) for humming:

I said, “Wait, did she”—I said, “Did she curse?” No. I said, “Did she disrespect another student?” No. I said,

3 → Mikaila Carwin, “The Charter School Network : The Disproportionate Discipline of Black Students,” in *The City University of New York Law Review* 21, no. 1 (2018).

4 → DuBois, “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?”

“Did she disrespect you?” No. She was humming. I said, “Okay, what did she do all day?” She was working all day. I said, “She hummed. She was happy. Don’t call me again.” I did not feel bad when I hung up.⁵

With discipline as the cornerstone of school culture, the teacher-parent relationship is relegated mitigating bad behavior instead of educating children. The constant barrage of discipline and punishment eats away at a Black students’ self-identity and confidence at an important stage in development where positive reinforcement and nurture are critical.

A recent study in urban education showed that Brown students attending no-excuses schools lagged in social development compared to students attending a nearby Montessori.⁶ While teachers at no-excuses schools dictate when student could talk, move about, raise their hands, or ask questions, the tight monitoring and control of students’ bodies does not equate with learning or development. The absence of opportunities for self-expression, self-advocacy, and initiative left many parents concerned that their children were being trained to be “robots” or “little mindless minions.” This form of education ultimately reenforces racial and economic inequalities by socializing Black and Brown students to remain subservient and powerless, while white and Asian students on the other side of town are encouraged to find their voices, question norms, and demonstrate independence.

The classroom is not always a safe space for Black and Brown children. In October 2015, a Black, high-school, teenage girl in Columbia, South Carolina was violently yanked out of her desk and onto the floor by a White, male school resource officer for using her cell phone in class. The video, which went viral on social media, sheds light on the reality that Black students are disproportionately and more violently punished compared to White students. (There’s no way in hell this would happen to a White student.) Liberation theologians and ethicists can help philosophers of education to pinpoint sites of

5 → Joanne W. Golann, Mira Debs, and Anna Lisa Weiss, “‘To Be Strict on Your Own’: Black and Latinx Parents Evaluate Discipline in Urban Choice Schools,” in *American Educational Research Journal* 56, no. 5 (2019): 15. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219831972>.

6 → Golann, Debs, and Weiss, “‘To Be Strict on Your Own.’”

Black suffering and social death in classrooms. There is a death that is deeper than physical death that is the death of meaning, hope, self-esteem, and flourishing that eats away a child's belief in the possibilities of the future. Dropping out can often lead to poverty, incarceration, and premature death. Philosophers of education too often ignore or bypass evil in pursuit of the ideal. An honest conversation across disciplines will help philosophers see how no-excuses school culture is evil because it stifles the growth and development of Black children.

PROTEST AND CONFRONTATION

Secondly, liberation theologians can nudge philosophers of education toward protest and confrontation. There is no liberation without confrontation. As we read in the Exodus narrative, which is a foundational referent for Cone's Black Liberation Theology, Moses, the leader of the Israelite community, is called by God to confront Pharaoh until Pharaoh's heart is finally hardened and he agrees to let Israel go.⁷ A philosophy of education that is grounded in liberating Black and Brown children must be willing to confront and protest systems of injustice and oppression that continuously harm and threaten the souls of Black children. It will take the rage of Black Liberation Theology and the hopeful practices of education to build a shelter for these precious children. There is a level of prophetic fire and willingness to fight that is required to demand freedom. "Let my people go!" requires a clearing of the throat and a passion that will not shrink.

To secure a more liberatory future, traditional practices grounded in conserving and perpetuating old scripts of control, discipline, and hierarchy must be disrupted by protest. Theologians, philosophers, and community leaders must create counter-narratives and call oppressors to task. Protest and disruption open space for more liberatory learning. Eric DeMeulenaere's work on "disruptive school rituals" explores how introducing rituals from religious communities and theaters transforms classroom life from monotonous motions of schooling to a life-giving experience. Ideally, the class is a learning environment that comes to life as students and teachers engage in the

7 → James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975).

exciting work of discovery with joy.

JOY AS LIBERATION

Finally, a dialogue between theologians and philosophers ought to lead us to consider the centrality of joy in liberatory work. In a world that is filled with constant reminders that Black lives *don't* matter, suffering takes the central focus of conversations and discourse to the extent that joy feels like a guilty pleasure. Joy calls us to reflect on the qualifier *liberation* in liberation theology. If liberation is the aim, it is helpful to remember that we must confront suffering in order to live into a freedom that is not confined or controlled. Cone defines liberation as the freedom to be in fellowship with God, with self, and the community of the oppressed.⁸ Philosophers of education and liberation theologians can work together to continue to make space for conversations about Black joy.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* DuBois states, “You might have noted only the physical dying, the shattered frame and hacking cough; but in that soul, lay deeper death than that...So, the man groped for light; all this was not life, —it was the world-wandering of a soul in search of itself, the striving of one who vainly sought his place in the world, ever haunted by the shadow of death is more than death.”⁹ DuBois helps us to realize that not all death is physical. The shadow of death is the looming, intimidating fear that hovers over one’s life. This constant fear causes us to live on the edge, ever watching out and over our backs for the enemy who can come and steal, kill, or destroy our joy at any time.

It is this shadow of death that prevents Black children and communities from experiencing the *unspeakable* and *indescribable* joy that gives us strength and hope to press on and imagine new possibilities. In just the past five years, we’ve seen a fourteen-year-old girl in a bikini shoved to the ground and handcuffed at a birthday party because of a noise complaint in Texas; nine members gathered for a Wednesday night Bible Study on a summer night killed in the basement of a church by a white supremacist; a group of Black women

8 → Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (1975).

9 → W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1903), 184.

thrown off a wine train in Napa Valley for laughing too loudly; and a school resource officer yanking a teenage Black girl from her desk and dragging her out of the classroom. Where is the joy for children attacked at a pool party, a congregation murdered during bible study, a women's book club kicked off a Napa Valley tour for laughing?

Black Joy can be defined as a form of resistance, for it challenges us to shift the discourse from violence, death, and injustice to remember the importance of leisure, solidarity, and creativity in the struggle toward liberation.

Liberation theologians and philosophers of education would both agree that joy is a fundamental ingredient for human flourishing. Joy is the feeling of pleasure and happiness that gives us the strength to wake up every day and continue to fight for our place in the sun. There is no social movement for freedom without music and art, laughter and leisure, food and drink, dancing and stepping. Black people deserve to have joy. Black children deserve to learn in classrooms that are filled with joy and happiness, rather than rules and discipline. We must work together to normalize joy. Without joy, the community is too weak to stand up and fight.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORICALLY BLACK EDUCATION

This conversation between liberation theologians and philosophers of education is not a novel concept. It harkens back to the birth of the Black Church and Black colleges as they were conceived in the imagination of formerly enslaved Blacks who turned to faith and education as a source of liberation from the psychological chains of slavery. The church created a communal space whereby they could evoke the life-affirming practices and traditions of their native land. Education was seen as a way to prepare men and women to serve in ministry, education, and medicine for the greater good. The Church and HBCUs have worked in tandem to save generations of students from the abyss of nihilism and despair. In spite of the degradation and dehumanization, Black colleges managed to breathe life into bones left dry and dead by racism's venom. Through high ideals,

academic rigor, rituals of affirmation, festivals of belonging and joy, loving mentorships, and words of endearment, the Black colleges have ensouled generations of youth who have gone on to change the world as courageous, democratic agents. It is my hope that liberation theologians and philosophers of education will begin to build a bridge across troubled waters to save the souls of Black children. With the prophetic fire of Black Liberation Theology that speaks truth to power, theologians can ring the alarm on the anti-Black policies in no-excuses schools. Philosophers of education can help theologians to leave room for life-sustaining joy. ■