

# Centering Student Identities in Critical Media Literacy Instruction

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It has been purported that half of all U.S. students will be children of color by 2030 (Sadker & Zittleman, 2012); yet, nationally, schools' curriculum and instruction do not adequately incorporate the histories and identities of the nation's varied ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. Researchers have detailed the lack of culturally relevant and responsive curricular content for decades, and there has been much debate about the core foci of texts (Banks, 1991; Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2010).

In many schools, White, Anglo-Saxon, male perspectives and writings have dominated how, particularly, English language arts educators teach learners to read and write (Applebee, 1993; Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2016). Disrupting the hegemonic normativity of this type of English language arts curriculum and instruction is central to challenging the labeling of certain learners as "struggling" readers and writers. Specifically, I have used critical media literacy as a pedagogical practice, and intervention, with youths to challenge dominant traditions within English language arts instruction. In this column, I share the significance of using critical media literacy and counterstories to engage young people with writing.

## Working With "Struggling" Writers

I am a former elementary classroom teacher who has also worked with middle and high school learners in myriad contexts. For two years, I was an instructor in the summer program for an early college program at a high school, helping learners with their writing. Writing, for my learners in the summer program, was a struggle. Consistently, I found that they were having troubles not only with grammar, usage, and mechanics but also, more importantly, with connecting and engaging with the texts and assignments. About a week and a half into the monthlong program, I found myself revising my curriculum to reflect the identities and experiences of the learners I was teaching by adding varied texts, such as music and music lyrics, and activities to engage and educate my learners.

Informed by this experience with the summer writing program, I cocreated and facilitated a critical media literacy collective, *Beyond Your Perception (BYP)*, with eight Black high school girls who were part of the same early college program. All of these girls identified as underrepresented (i.e., first-generation learners, learners from working-class and wage-poor families and communities, learners of color). *BYP* was created for Black girls' media literacy and identity meaning making and with a curriculum that centered Black women authors and artists.

## Critical Media Literacy

Media literacy teaches learners how to access, evaluate, and produce media. Critical media literacy expands this by encouraging learners to define relationships of power and question social norms. Because youths are often unaware of the influence of media on their psyche, it becomes even more significant that educators utilize critical pedagogical approaches to aid learners in becoming critically conscious (Kellner, 2000; Yosso, 2002).

It is important that literacy instruction supports learners' ability to read myriad texts, in addition to how to read the world they live in as text. In a media-saturated society, where youths are educated daily by and through the media they engage with, critical media literacy becomes a significant and impactful way to create critical consumers and critical producers and promote critical thinking.

*BYP* operated twice each week, for two hours per session for 14 weeks, and began with a sociohistorical examination of the foundational stereotypes of Black women (see Table 1). The jezebel, mammy, matriarch, sapphire, and welfare mother are pejorative

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[Correction added on May 31, 2019: "Black" and "White" have been capitalized throughout after first publication. This has not been corrected in the print issue.]

Table 1  
Beyond Your Perception Curriculum Overview

Unit	Description	Media literacy key concept(s)
Sociohistorical Understandings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyzed foundational stereotypes: jezebel, mammy, matriarch, sapphire, and welfare mother</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding origins of gendered racism, sexism, and colorism as they relate to Black women</li> </ul>
Media Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Viewed and listened to music videos and clips from television shows and films</li> <li>Discussed the lyrics and imagery in videos and the messages in television shows and films</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Addressing consumerism</li> <li>Critically examining media and the industry</li> </ul>
Counternarratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduced a variety of mediums for the girls to express their individuality</li> <li>Wrote personal counterstories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding the dangers of a single story</li> <li>Composing counterstories</li> </ul>

stereotypes of Black women that provide the foundation for contemporary caricatures. An example of this is Sapphire, which originated from the Sapphire Stevens character in the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio and television series.

Sapphire was loud and mean, emasculated her husband, and is the foundation of the current “angry Black woman” trope. Within *BYP*’s discussion of these foundational stereotypes (Stephens & Phillips, 2003), I asked the girls to provide glimpses into these women’s real lives, as in responding to questions such as “Why might Sapphire be angry?” and “Why may the welfare mother be utilizing governmental assistance?” The origin stories that the girls created for these women were profound.

During a follow-up session, as a mentor text, we listened to and read the lyrics of Nina Simone’s “Four Women,” a song composed to articulate Black women’s suffering as highlighted through the experiences of four of the Black women stereotypes. I also used Maya Angelou’s (1994) poem “Phenomenal Woman,” which we first read in silence, and then I read aloud. I explained that Angelou was speaking back to the stereotypes about Black womanhood, highlighting “I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size” and “I don’t shout or jump about / Or have to talk real loud” (p. 130). Then, I tasked the girls with choosing a stereotype and composing a counterstory for her.

### Counterstories: Getting Beyond the “Struggling” Writers Label

Counterstories are outsider stories and, as Baszile (2009) explained, “are told from the perspective of the marginalized and are intended to challenge the universality and often the efficacy of the majoritarian story,

not simply in its context but also in its very structure” (pp. 10–11). Delgado (1989) explained that counterstories are used to uncover stories of the marginalized and are a strategy for analyzing the dominant narrative, which serves to maintain power in racial and other forms.

According to hooks (1984), ideas about race have placed African American females in a complex dual relationship to both Black culture and the dominant culture. That means that Black women have to negotiate their racialized gender in their daily interactions. Therefore, for Black girls specifically and learners of color generally, to be forced to entertain curriculum and instruction divorced from the reality of their social, political, and cultural contexts is the antithesis of engaging learners and alienates learners from schooling. Using critical media literacy is a necessary means to aid us in reimagining our society in ways that are authentic to folks living on the margins of the dominant society.

In *BYP*, when we reached our third unit, *Counternarratives*, I asked the girls to think back to our counterstory activity and how we attempted to provide a voice for those intentionally silenced women. I also asked them to think back to a previous activity in which they individually listed common misperceptions of Black women that they personally experienced. Many of the girls stated that people hold perceptions of them that are unlike who they really are. Reflecting on that activity, I challenged the girls to create a counterstory for those misperceptions. The following is a counterstory that *Sy* (pseudonym) composed:

It isn’t the dip in my upper lip that tells you the depth of my thoughts, or my heart, or my soul. That dip is simply a diagonal line that tricks the average person into believing they have me figured out. Then there is the minor arc that is less than 180° that can’t even begin to describe the complexity

of my inner being. It makes the average person think a little harder and that's usually when they have me bent. Then there is the crease that separates what you probably think I am from what you know I am. You start to grin because you think you have spelled supercalifragilisticexpialidocious right but you missed 7 letters. But then, you are met with a drop, not a dip. A dip isn't deep enough to describe how you have picked me apart in your mind. You didn't just detach me from my clothes or hair, but you detached me from my flesh, my being; because the drop made you think a little harder, made you do a quadruple take, tilt your head to the side, squint your eye, and second guess yourself more than you have second guessed life. That drop hurts you. It wounds you because its depth is equivalent to a quadratic equation with infinite x's, it's everlasting! I am not the fullness of my lips but the capacity of my mind.

The richness in imagery, expression, and mathematical language is a testament to Sy's engagement with the material and the assignment. Her composition uses imagery to align her physical countenance with the ways in which Black girls are treated because of the misperceptions and prejudices of others. The line "you think you have spelled supercalifragilisticexpialidocious right but you missed 7 letters" is creative because her real name is spelled with seven letters. She used the fullness of her lips to articulate how she can be misperceived based on her physical features. She used mathematical concepts (something more familiar and comfortable to her than literacy) to explain the fallacy of metaphorically judging a book by its cover.

Black women's experiences are connected to most of today's social problems (Collins, 2000), so Sy's experiences of misperceptions, prejudices, bigotry, and injustices based solely on her skin tone are reflective of the racist, sexist, and classist underpinnings of society. Further, that schools are not a space for learners to understand, articulate, or grapple with their lived experiences is a shortcoming on the part of teachers, classrooms, and schools.

When I sat down to discuss this counterstory with Sy one-on-one, I was interested in how she interpreted her piece and what she wanted others to get from it. She explained,

I know who I am...knowing who I am does not mean I am unaware of what others think or believe. It means that I acknowledge the idea of others having an idea of who I am but I happily dismiss any *presumptions* that produce *sympathy*, *empathy*, or any efforts of saving from my *counterparts*.

Not only is her writing dynamic, but her reflection and articulation of her composition is rooted in the ideas and terminology that we discussed during the BYP units. Sy was able to grasp and advance the content

because the curriculum and instruction reflected her identities and experiences. BYP was a shared learning space. We learned from each other, although I was their teacher and they were my students. We accomplished much in that space together, but the intricacy with which we wrestled with the new knowledge and texts, and our connection to them, is no different from the work that could, and should, be done in English language arts classrooms. Further, I argue that this work could be done, and done well, in other content areas.

Reading and composing counterstories taught the girls, as Sy's counterstory indicates, to be literate social practitioners who speak their truths while deconstructing dominant narratives. Employing critical media literacy and writing activities, such as the composition of counterstories, can aid classroom teachers in engaging 21st-century learners in an expanded view and practice of literacy while they discover the power of their own voices.

## Conclusion

In previous writings (McArthur, 2016, 2018), I articulated the importance of learners having mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990) so they can see a reflection of themselves, as well as gain an understanding about the cultural experiences and lived realities of others. How we decide curricular decisions is never neutral (Apple, 2004), as teaching is a political act. Who we choose to provide voice to in our classes through text significantly impacts student engagement and learning. We must choose to be deliberate and intentional in the authors we read and give voice to in our classroom spaces so texts can be mirrors and windows, as well as pathways to endless possibilities. We must choose to ground activities and assignments in critical cognitive tasks that honor and value the multiplicity of identities and literacies of the learners in our schools.

I am not suggesting that all learners whose identities are centered will become prize-winning writers, but I am questioning who they could become if they weren't bored. What if they saw value in who and what they were tasked with reading and writing? What your learners are capable of may be beyond your perception based on your own identities and associated teaching practices that limit your perspective. As educators, it is important for us to recognize that many of our practices erode student engagement and learning. In an effort to transform literacy instruction beyond struggling, we must rethink pedagogical practice in ways that honor and value the identities and literacies of the learners in our classrooms.

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