FORUM

"Yardie get di blame": exploring positionality, transnationalism, and cultural capital in social justice STEM education

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Abstract

This paper is in dialogue with Lisa Marco-Bujosa's article titled, "Soul searching in science teaching: an exploration of critical teaching events through the lens of intersectionality" where the author takes up the ways that Faith's Jamaican immigrant Black woman identities are shaped and how she understood and enacted teaching for social justice. We share ideas that add more nuance to the author's analyses of Faith's beliefs and practices. In doing so, we reframe key concepts on (1) seeing immigrant background as cultural capital in the classroom rather than as an impediment to science teaching, (2) understanding the myth of meritocracy from a critical race theory lens, and (3) expanding transnational notions of the ideological and practical underpinnings inherent in teaching for social justice. We further examine how minoritized forms of cultural capital can work to disrupt oppressive ideology and practices in STEM education.

In Buju Banton's song, Yardie, he shares the challenges Jamaicans face as they experience perceptions of Jamaicans or "yardies'' abroad, particularly in the USA and England. In the song, he notes, "Everything weh gwan a foreign ah di yardie get the blame, the queen, the

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yankee dem, love call up yardie name" (Banton 1993, Track 2). While this song refers to assertions of Jamaican criminality, he points to how Jamaicanness itself is often framed as problematic without a clear examination of larger social, political, and economic structures that shape Jamaican culture and experiences both on the island and abroad. Furthermore, there is often little acknowledgment of the vast transnational contributions Jamaicans have made across the globe. Buju's framing of this phenomenon is instructive as we examine perceptions of Faith, a Black Jamaican woman and novice science teacher on her journey to and through teaching for social justice.

By and large, Black people from the global south are absent from US-based research about Black people in general; this research gap is all the more vacuous within the field of education and further exacerbated in STEM education. In the article, "Soul searching in science teaching: An exploration of critical teaching events through the lens of inter-sectionality" by Lisa Marco-Bujosa, the author takes up the intersectional dimensions of a budding teacher from Jamaica teaching in US schools and traces her longitudinal development from her social justice-centered teacher education program to her third year of science teaching. The paper articulates how Faith's identities as a Black woman and a Jamaican immigrant shaped how she understood and enacted teaching for social justice. The article makes several claims about Faith's development as an educator who teaches for social justice. The author argues that Faith's Jamaican culture created incongruencies between her beliefs and practices as a social justice educator. These included (1) what the author deemed as Faith's ascription to meritocratic beliefs due to her expectations that students master certain scientific knowledge, (2) Faith engaging in authoritarian styles of teaching, which the author attributed to Faith's Jamaican culture, and (3) Faith ironically rejecting these same authoritarian beliefs in a new majority-Black context in her second and third years of teaching.

While Marco-Bujosa's work raises several important points, there are several bodies of research that can add more nuance to the author's analyses of Faith's beliefs and practices. In this paper, we first explicate our positional identities (Moore 2008) as key to our reading and analysis of Marco-Bujosa's work. We also explore how minoritized culture is often framed as a deficit, rather than an asset, examining how minoritized forms of cultural capital work to disrupt oppressive ideology and practices in STEM. We also look to research transnational understandings of blackness and anti-Black racism to both critique and reframe the limiting and often US-centric ways in which Blackness and social justice are conceived in educational spaces.

Positionality: the lens from which we read and interpret the world

Researcher positionality is central to the research questions individuals ask as well as how they read the world in both the literal and figurative sense. This includes how we interpret research literature and how we analyze data. In her paper, Marco-Bujosa described herself as a white woman from a working-class suburban community in the USA. However, she cited her experiences as a middle school science teacher in a majority Black and Latine urban context, as well as her experience as a doctoral student in the Science Educators for Urban Schools program, as central to shaping her interest in and proximity to Black and Latine people and notions of teaching for social justice. Despite these connections, there are critical layers of difference between the researcher and research participant wrought by intersectional identities and complexities such as race, culture, and nationality/immigrant

status, to name a few. Attempting to interpret and translate meaning across race, ethnicity, culture, and national borders is a formidable task, requiring a delicate balance and consideration for potential blindspots (Reich 2021) and acknowledgment of this as a potential research limitation (Olukotun, Mkandawire, Antilla, Alfaifa, Weitzel, Scheer, Olukotun, Mkandawire-Valhmu 2021). Scholars cite ongoing self-reflection "as an important tool for empirically researching transnational phenomena" (Amelina and Feist 2012, p. 1712), a strategy that could have been taken up more readily in Marco-Bujosa's work.

While we believe Marco-Bujosa's positionality is central to how she interpreted key concepts discussed in her paper, we believe our positionalities are also central to how we read, interpret, and choose to respond to her work—recognizing that there are both strengths and limitations to insider/outsider positionalities (Olukotun, Mkandawire, Antilla, Alfaifa, Weitzel, Scheer, Olukotun, Mkandawire-Valhmu 2021). Below we each share our positionalities as women of Black immigrant descent who also center social justice in our work, particularly concerning Black people in general, but also Black immigrants, more specifically. Following that, we reframe three key points—cultural capital in the classroom, the myth of meritocracy, and the expansion of transnational for social justice teaching.

In Chonika's words

I was born in Queens, New York to Jamaican immigrant parents and grew up in a large extended family. Much of my experience included moving about the vast Jamaican Diaspora in New York that had significantly shaped the city's culture. Beyond my experiences with Jamaican culture in New York, I began traveling to the island of Jamaica at just a few months old and spent several months a year in various parts of the island, but mostly in my mother's rural hometown in my formative years and my father's hometown in adolescence and adulthood. As I have navigated space and place across the vastly different US and Jamaican contexts, I remember analyzing how I saw issues of race, class, racism, ethnicity, and immigration panning out. These lifelong experiences shape how I understand transnational notions of Blackness as well as how I read US-centered interpretations of Black immigrants' beliefs and practices. My initial musings have grown into a research agenda, which includes the racial and ethnic identity development and educational experiences of Afro-Caribbean immigrants. As someone who identifies as both Jamaican and American, but not either in isolation, my position is that of an insider–outsider and this position shapes both my interpretation and response to Marco-Bujosa's work.

In Takeshia's words

I was born in Miami, Florida to Haitian immigrant parents and raised with two older brothers. I grew up in neighborhoods that consisted of mostly Haitian and Afro-Caribbean immigrants and had classmates of similar backgrounds, in addition to Hispanic/Latine people. It was common for my classmates to be first-generation college students and our parents to work mostly blue-collared jobs. Specific to Haitian households, a phrase typically taught to children was "Lekòl, Legliz, Lakay,'' which translates to "school, church, and home." This meant there were only three places Haitian children were expected to spend their time, avoiding anything that would lead them into trouble, or worse, away from their studies and devotion to God. My household was not any different, where my brothers and

I were taught to maintain a standard of academic excellence, honesty, and dedication to family. As I grew and attended schools outside my cultural community, the reality of racism, poverty, immigration, linguistic discrimination, and injustices became more evident. I attended schools that were segregated, a by-product of racism and poverty, and students regularly suffered educational disparities. My ability to see these issues grew more vivid as I was further immersed in less diverse spaces, such as the predominantly white institution where I worked and studied for over 10 years. The culmination of my experiences during my formative years into adulthood, witnessing the richness of cultural diversity and darkness of racism, has shaped my thoughts and approach to research. My training as a public health practitioner and within the field of education has allowed me to transform these experiences into a research agenda that underscores the importance of subjectivities. I believe this and my accounts have helped me to develop a niche to intricately observe and understand the nuances of behavior, culture, and environment when studying minoritized communities. I identify as a Haitian-American Black Woman, and my intersections are not possible to disaggregate. My identities, experiences, and perspectives serve as emic and etic to my interpretation of this work.

What is "too Jamaican?": (re-)situating culture as capital in STEM classrooms

Educational spaces writ large, and STEM spaces, in particular, have garnered a reputation for being cold environments where minoritized groups often experience discrimination (Ong, Smith, Ko 2018). In classrooms, teachers have also yielded a reputation for perceiving minoritized populations from a deficit-based lens. In the text by Marco-Bujaso, it was stated that Faith's supervisor told Faith that her challenges as a teacher were because her teaching style was "too Jamaican," describing her actions as stereotypical of Jamaican culture and identity—impersonal and authoritarian-like, a description supported by the author's interpretations of Faith's habits as a beginning science teacher. The statement from the supervisor, fashioned as a critical teaching event, was not contested throughout the literature. The author expressed the "authoritative" nature Faith took in classrooms as a barrier to student learning, and the article's readings of meritocratic behavior were viewed as tangential to Jamaican cultural customs. In this case, and in the case of others who hold various identity intersections, Faith's Jamaican cultural identity was positioned as a deficit (Sotou-Manning and Rabadi-Raol 2018). Faith's cultural identity was described as a barrier to effective science teaching, and her eventual acculturation was celebrated.

We first contest the problematic nature of being referred to as "too Jamaican" and acknowledge this critical event as an additional offense to other traumatic experiences as a first-year pre-service teacher, which included being the subject of a petition to be removed from a classroom. While an article cited in Marco-Bujaso stated that Caribbean immigrant teachers, at times, "miss the subtleties of race, class, and gender in the US context," Angela Rhone (2007) also states, "As teachers in their homeland, these educators were revered, regardless of their race. In the United States, they are viewed as minority teachers who are immigrants. Their whole being is now entwined with minority immigrant teacher status" (p. 45). To view Faith, and Afro-Caribbean immigrants' cultural background as an asset to student education, we must trouble [decolonize] the hegemonic lens by which immigrant culture is perceived within the US context. Consequently, we resituate Faith's "too Jamaican" culture as capital in the classroom.

Through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, Tara Yosso (2005) described a cultural wealth framework that positioned the various forms of capital possessed by Communities of Color as an asset to the classroom. CRT is described to help "shift the research lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color and instead focu[s] on and lear[n] from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p. 69). Yosso goes on to describe these various forms of cultural wealth by introducing six forms of capital. These forms of cultural capital include being:

(1) *aspirational,* the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers, (2) *navigational,* the skills of maneuvering through social institutions; historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind, (3) *social,* can be understood as networks of people and community resources; these peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions, (4) *linguistic,* includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style (see Faulstich Orellana 2003), (5) *familial* to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition, and (6) *resistant* capital, knowledges, and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality.

Viewing Faith from a lens of cultural capital, one might naturally observe that she demonstrates aspirational, navigational, linguistic, and resistant capital as a Black woman, and immigrant teacher. These forms of cultural capital, we argue, are not only unique to Faith but are also relevant to Black immigrants in America. One of the most inspiring forms of cultural capital exhibited by Black immigrants is aspirational capital. In many cases, Black immigrants are credited for leaving their homeland in search of a better life and hoping to create opportunities for their families (Kiramba, Kumi-Yeboah, Smith, Sallar 2021). This aspirational capital also shapes how they contend with issues of anti-Black racism–resisting notions of Black mediocrity and persisting through hardships and low expectations for success (Coleman-King 2014). Aspirational capital also reflects a form of resistant capital. Black immigrants studying STEM education cite their parents' sacrificial efforts to send them to the states or fund their education as motivation and reinforcement to do well in their respective fields (Onuma, Berhane, Fries-Britt 2020). These ideas push against dominant narratives of STEM as exclusive spaces dedicated to white men. Faith's presence as a Black woman in STEM and her insistence on student excellence directly counter the kinds of gendered anti-Black racism that are pervasive in STEM fields (McGee 2020). In fact, as someone who hails from a majority-Black country, Faith is more likely to bring a transnational lens that normalizes Black participation in every sector of society (Coleman-King 2014), including STEM fields, given that most of these roles were almost entirely occupied by Black people in her country of origin—mitigating the possibility for bias of low expectations for Black people.

Furthermore, navigational capital in the context of Black immigrants relates to their experiences navigating STEM spaces where cultural norms are different from their own. The racial oppression they experience is new, given they have come from a majority and often almost exclusively Black nations (Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, Peralta 2014). Black immigrants represent a significant percentage of people in STEM and health careers (New American Economy Research Fund 2018), despite making up less than 10% of the US Black population (PEW Research 2021). In recent decades, Black immigrants have developed and passed on various forms of social capital in their new countries. Research has found that immigrants who have careers in medicine and STEM are likely to have children

who enter these respective careers (Thomas and Lonibile 2021), serving to diversify these fields and simultaneously making an impact on US society and abroad.

What is arguably the most powerful form of cultural capital that Black immigrants showcase is resistant capital. Inclusion and acknowledgment of the cultural identities of Black immigrants resist the often essentialized identity of Black people occupying STEM spaces (Pierre and Pringle forthcoming), pushing against the notion that Black identity is a monolith. Celebration of the African Diaspora can counter essentialized views of Blackness that stem from hegemony and emphasize the often-silenced narrative that science existed in Black nations and exists outside of eurocentric science education seen in the USA (Rosa and Mensah 2021). Ultimately, we believe Faith showcased a number of these forms of cultural capital in our reading of her experience as a novice science teacher, but what her experience also showcases is an opportunity for culture in the context of ethnicity to serve as capital in STEM classrooms.

The myth of meritocracy

CRT is a framework that helps us understand how racism and oppression function and the role of whiteness and racial oppression in shaping the experiences of racially minoritized groups (Edward 1998). Critical race theorists posit the concept of meritocracy as a myth (Love 2004). This myth is used to absolve the US of its long history of racialized oppression and its impact on the educational access and success and socioeconomic mobility of Black people. The myth of meritocracy translates to blaming the victims of oppression for the racism and discrimination they face, absolving systemic structures and racist individuals of responsibility for perpetuating discriminatory practices and policies (Yao, George Mwangi, Malaney Brown 2019).

In the context of Marco-Bujosa's article, Faith is believed to invoke meritocratic beliefs in her teaching—arguing that if students work hard to master key scientific terms and content—they would experience success. However, Faith's expectation that students master key concepts in preparation for their upcoming Advanced Placement examination also reflected what many critical education scholars might refer to as reflective of demonstrating high expectations of all students. High academic expectations, as it relates to Black and Brown students, are reportedly lacking in most US schools and have contributed to persistent academic challenges of racially minoritized students (Winbush 2013). Marco-Bujosa reported that these "meritocratic beliefs" caused Faith "…to overlook racial oppression and its impact on students in the United States" (p. 22). She further posited that "the theme of hard work was connected to the overarching theme of meritocracy through the Jamaican cultural lens" (p. 19) and that "By emphasizing meritocratic ideals that structured educational opportunity in Jamaica, Faith overlooked the broader racialized context of science education in the United States" (p. 25).

The context of the myth of meritocracy presented in the article does not accurately reflect the traditional origins of this CRT principle. First, the contextual understanding of the "myth of meritocracy," is situated in the USA, particularly around a hegemonic ideology that renders Black people inferior due to their assumed poor work ethic, and subsequently legitimizes class hierarchies that reward whites, who are deemed superior in American society (Crenshaw 1988). As further defined by CRT scholars, the myth of meritocracy troubles the systemic issues in American society that pacify the overt racial bias of Black people by framing meritocracy as a method to avoid subordination, rather than

troubling racist infrastructures. Edward Taylor (1998) states that "by relying on merit criteria or standards, the dominant group can justify its exclusion of Blacks to positions of power, believing in its neutrality. CRT asserts that such standards are chosen, they are not inevitable, and they should be openly debated and reformed in ways that no longer benefit privileged whites alone" (p. 123). By this definition, to posit Faith as holding meritocratic beliefs is to simultaneously believe she wields power that is designed to position students as inferior, forcing them to work for something unattainable to substantiate their placement in science classrooms. However, in this case, Faith's goal was to help students gain access by setting high academic expectations. Understanding meritocracy through the lens of CRT is essential to reframing Faith's efforts as aligned with teaching for social justice.

Broadening notions of teaching for social justice

Marco-Bujosa stated, "teaching science for social justice involves teachers developing the knowledge and skills necessary to provide greater access to science learning for students by both responding to students' academic and social needs and resisting social structures of oppression" (p. 3). However, the characteristics Faith exemplified were described as authoritative and held a negative connotation, leading us to believe that the author related Faith's actions to habits of an authoritarian, further substantiated by her claims that Faith was showcasing meritocratic beliefs. In addition, in Marco-Bujosa's description of Faith's thoughts, Faith expressed having higher expectations for her students' effort and commitment to their science studies, which were subsequently deemed oppressive. Multiple scholars whose work centers social justice teaching speak to the centrality of high expectations as well as a firm insistence on academic achievement in the work of effective teachers. For instance, Elyse Hambacher, Melanie Acosta, Elizabeth Bondy, and Dorene Ross (2016) argue for the importance of teachers being "warm demanders." Warm demanders are teachers who balance care and authority. In describing the characteristics of warm demanders, Hambacher et al. stated that the teachers in their study "acknowledged that the words, "I care about you" were simply not enough. That is, they consistently proved their care for students through their actions, which included teaching the whole child; interacting with students in personal, familial ways; and maintaining high expectations for student learning" (p. 177). They go on to explain, "Those who privilege Eurocentric ideas about care may perceive the warm demander's no-nonsense approach as "harsh." However, many teachers and students within African American communities perceive this approach as a demonstration of the teachers' belief in their students' ability to succeed" (p. 177). Consequently, what we perceived as holding students accountable to high academic standards was seen as deploying a color-blind ideology regarding meritocracy. While it might have been the case that Faith needed to balance her insurance on academic achievement with improved relational bonds, having high expectations of students is not antithetical to social justice teaching.

Teachers as well as individuals working in STEM who hold immigrant identities enter the classroom with a rich and diverse lens that can be beneficial to student learning. What particularly stands out, as in the case of Faith, is that teachers that come from an all-Black nation, may not hold the similar, often lowered expectations that non-Black teachers have reportedly showcased towards Black students (Gershenson, Holt, Papageorge 2016), even in the context of STEM (Rogers 2020). Positioning students as contributors to the learning process and believing they are fully capable of applying themselves can further motivate

Black students to excel in STEM education. These higher expectations as defined in literature are examples of teaching for social justice (Rojas and Liou 2017).

In part, what we see reflected in the tensions between how Marco-Bujosa is positioning social justice education is also inherent in the US-centric lens on anti-Black racism. Christopher Busey and Chonika Coleman-King (2020) posit that movements against the dehumanization of Black people predate such movements in the USA. For example, Haiti was the first sovereign Black nation to successfully win its freedom against European colonizers in 1804 (Eddins 2022). In comparing movements for Black Lives across Brazil and the US, Busey and Coleman-King (2020) argue that "resistance movements not only represent an act of transnational racial solidarity but also accentuate the global nature of systemic and systematic anti-Black racism" (p. 3). Even in majority-Black countries, Black people have an awareness of the global impact of racism and the legacy of colonization. In the case of Jamaica, this is particularly evident in Rastafarian music and culture as well as the transnational work of Marcus Garvey who saw Black people as universally oppressed based on race despite where they were situated on the globe (Stephens 1998). Female Afro-Caribbean STEM workers and teachers who have immigrated to the US also display awareness of the global impact of racism, yet they maintain a positive identity and pride in Black identity due to their strong collective cultural grounding, historical knowledge of Garvey's transnational work, and the Pan-African movement, contesting hegemonic structures (King Miller 2017). None of this is taken up as being a part of Faith's legacy and connection to teaching for social justice. Faith is deemed a tabula rasa or blank slate when it comes to understanding racism and race relations in the USA.

While racism in the USA is a unique beast itself, to suggest that Black people from other contexts lack complete awareness of US racism is problematic. This is especially true in an era where the Black Lives Matter movement has received global coverage and where Black people across the globe have joined in the movement as a form of solidarity and a reflection of their experiences with racial oppression. Additionally, narratives of Black people's experiences with anti-Black racism are more readily accessible in an age where stories of racial oppression are being made widely available on the internet and in various social media spaces (Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

Conclusion

Social justice teaching calls for an examination of the identities people bring to their work as educators and how these identities, in turn, shape others' perceptions of them. Research has long demonstrated that Black women teachers are scrutinized more heavily and routinely and receive poorer evaluations of their teaching at the postsecondary level (Drake, Cowen, Auletto 2019). While research also suggests that students of all races benefit from having Black teachers, less is known about how they evaluate those teachers on the K-12 level as there are no routine means of student evaluations of teacher success (Peterson, Wahlquist, Bone 2000). Being Black, woman, and immigrant in US educational institutions comes with much scrutiny and othering, an experience that is often isolating and contentious (Coleman-King 2022). To understand Faith's role as a science teacher within the US context without thoroughly examining the multiple forces that shape her ideology, experiences, and teaching practice go against some very foundational notions of social justice work. However, the students' move to have Faith removed from their classroom in her early teaching career was deemed a product of her Jamaican culture. We stress the importance

of troubling negative associations to cultural identity like in Faith's experiences and highlight how problematic it can be given the negative connotations Afro-Caribbean immigrant teachers already face in classrooms (Esnard and Cobb-Roberts 2019). We believe the stories, identities, and ultimately the inclusivity of people from different cultural backgrounds in the classroom, like Faith, will help encourage true teaching for social justice in science education.

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