INTRODUCTION: A KINSHIP MENTORING

In much the same way that distant whispers are in need of echoes, scholarship needs to grow or be refashioned by new scholars who can bring fresh perspectives and new critiques to existing scholarship. These perspectives and critiques are required because of inevitable shifts in educational and social contexts and human understandings. It becomes vital to not simply advise the next generation of scholars, but to also mentor them in ways that help to cultivate their minds so they are prepared to use their voices in powerful ways to improve and advance the state of educational progress.

Alfred

In 2000, I entered what I consider to be the crucible of literacy scholarship: scholarship focused on advancing and reversing the underperformance of Black boys in literacy classrooms without ignoring the needs of so many high-achieving Black boys who are overlooked because of the ongoing rhetoric of wholesale and pathological failure. In an effort to make sense of contemporary literacy errors and practices that were arresting the intellectual development of Black boys in schools, I began to cozy up with history and excavate the storied tradition of Black male readers and writers in the United States to envisage the pathway forward. At that time, I would have described myself as a solitary researcher trying to find his way in the wilderness.

I became overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenges and the slow pace of literacy reforms that were making a significant difference in urban classrooms. Many reforms and associated mandates and authorizations were only yielding small upticks in reading achievement for the boys who were the focus of my research. I needed the bold participation of a cadre of emerging scholars who were interested in studying the literacy development of Black boys and shattering the narrative that permeates the national imagination to become part of a literacy movement. The goal was to create a welcoming platform for emerging scholars of color and provide an environment of vitality that ran counter to environments that can be fraught with tensions for doctoral students who decided to set the record straight in a patriarchal society that had difficulty acknowledging, accepting, and honoring their layered and complex identities. Because of the potential magnitude of her work, I simply wanted to encourage her to move forward fearlessly so that her work would not become imprisoned by smallness. It was important that she had the room to roam. I simply had to ask the tough questions and provide nudgings when necessary as gentle reminders of the importance of her work so that she would resist any form of “caged” scholarship.

Working with Ggoldy Muhammad yielded a complementary form of gendered and scholarly kinship as she resisted my invitation to focus primarily on Black boys. Instead, she focused her research and scholarship on Black girls. I became both a teacher and student as her work caused me to listen to the historical whispers of Black women who used literacy and gave birth to unique literary strivings that resisted racial and gender oppression in order to set the record straight in a patriarchal society that had difficulty acknowledging, accepting, and honoring their layered and complex identities. What is particularly noteworthy is his rich description of the “caged bird” amongst this pain. He wrote about a yearning for freedom and growth, which became kinship and connected themes in

“One of the first scholars to join me was Gholnecsar “Gholdy” Muhammad, who, by her presence and research interests, caused me to embrace the identity of scholarly mentor. Fully embracing that

mentors and mentees can work together to change the topography of a field of study, I accepted this role in earnest. I am reminded of the large number of math scholars who cite their Erdos number because they are somehow connected to the mathematician Paul Erdos, who traveled extensively and published widely with math scholars who were coming into their own. My aim, however, was quite different for the emerging scholars who allowed me to support their quest for their own scholarly signatures. I wanted our work together to become a form of kinship anchored by theoretical, historical, and practical strands grounded in translational research. In short, I wanted us to figure out how our scholarly ideas manifest and impact those who are the focus of our scholarship.

“I Know What the Caged Bird Feels, Alas!” The need to resist the “cage” is beautifully captured by two of our historic Brother and Sister authors, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Maya Angelou. Dunbar penned the poem “Sympathy” in 1899 amongst a sociopolitical climate that was imbued with hostility and injustice that attempted to emasculate the advancement of Black Americans. In the gentleness of his poetic craft, he wrote about what the “caged bird feels” and, through his language, expressed feelings of pain through sympathetic concern. What is particularly noteworthy is his rich description of the “bird” amongst this pain. He wrote about a yearning for freedom and growth, which became kinship and connected themes in

“Caged Bird” from SHAKER, WHY DON’T YOU SING? by Maya Angelou, copyright © 1983 by Maya Angelou. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

“I Know What the Caged Bird Feels, Alas!”: Reflections on Mentoring and Scholarship in the Academy

GHOLNECSAR “GHOLODY” E. MUHAMMAD, GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY, AND ALFRED W. TATUM, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO
Angelou’s poem, written 70 years later. In “Caged Bird,” Angelou wrote about the beauty and resilience of the caged bird that, too, breaks free to sing or flourish. Like her mentor Dunbar, she wrote about the tension that rests in our “wings”—wings that become bruised and afflicted by strivings, yet still endure. Together, their writings connect successive generations and are emblematic of the type of kinship that can characterize and inspire our mentor/mentee relationship and could serve as an example of other mentoring relationships in the academy:

“Sympathy” by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1899)

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opens,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!
I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And he opens his throat to sing—
I know why he opens his throat to sing!
I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

“Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou (1969)

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill . . .
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Gholdy

I began my doctoral studies in the fall of 2009. I had made the decision to take a step toward a more advanced level of education one year before, when I was serving as a school administrator responsible for K–12 literacy curriculum and assessment for a district with roughly 5,500 students. Just three years into the position, I began to feel some intellectual restraint and tension because I did not feel completely free to express and enact change in the ways I desired. At this time, education was being informed (and in many ways still is) by perspective frameworks and governed by curricula that did not serve to advance youth’s sensemaking of their histories, identities, and multiple literacies. I often describe my past experiences as working in a system that puts fresh coats of paint on deteriorating buildings/structures that do not serve students in the most excellent of forms—especially students who have been historically marginalized across our nation. And I had a longing inside of me to transform these structures and instructional paradigms that shape practice. Intellectually, I felt confined and needed to reposition myself in a space where I could push my thinking about critical issues and power in literacy education. Like many who have intentions to pursue a PhD, I wanted to find a community that could nurture and cultivate the yearning inside of me to “sing” in ways that would give me the means to push back on those same confinements that police many schools across the country.

I researched scholars who were doing the type of work that I envisioned for myself and was reminded of the dynamic synergies that occur when a person surrounds herself with the most excellent of thinkers. I came across Dr. Alfred Tatum’s scholarship and decided to apply for the Literacy, Language, and Culture program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Similarly to Alfred, my mentor and now my colleague, I also had aims early on to reverse and advance the outcomes for youth while finding ways that in- and out-of-school pedagogies could stretch beyond focusing solely on performance or literacy skills. My decision to focus primarily on Black girls and their literacies and identities was not happenstance. Instead, it emerged from years of being that “caged bird” that Sister Maya wrote about. I knew the ways in which literacy and writing transformed my life, my self-identity, and my thinking, and I wanted to discover if girls could benefit in similar ways when space is created for them in educative environments. I knew the work was critical and timely as Black girls across the world are being misrepresented, dehumanized, and forgotten.

I also read the literary works of Black women whose collective writings contributed to formulating a rich history of artistic and intellectual excellence. Writing was not just a means of communicating thoughts in print, but a complex exercise of mediating and negotiating one’s self and the surrounding world. I wondered how adolescent girls would respond to a space crafted around their literacy histories and if they too wrote in ways similar to Black women of the past. Very quickly, my research became less about fulfilling the requirements of a dissertation than about work that nourished my soul.
Working with Alfred provided a space where I could freely talk about critical work while crafting my researcher-identity. He served not only as an intellectual sounding board but also as a model of the type of scholarly identity that I desired. In my observations, I noticed his commitment to community-engaged scholarship as his outreach, teaching, and research all converged rather than being isolated efforts. I watched as he took his scholarship into community centers teaching adult literacy or school classrooms teaching Black boys. Like many doctoral students, I wondered if the academy was a place for me, and if it would keep me from teaching youth and volunteering in communities, or if I had to focus solely on writing for publication. I learned from Alfred’s leadership that I did not have to face such an “either-or” dilemma, and that I could carve out a pathway toward my goals of working both in higher education and in communities of need.

Following the historic traditions of African American people, kinship mentoring is one that is collaborative and mutually beneficial. It is done unselfishly and promotes shared learning and responsibility for cultivating one another’s minds. Our mentor/mentee relationship has several forms that include writing together, leading outreach initiatives in communities, teaching together, supporting each other’s scholarship, and supporting adolescents. A focus on adolescents was the thread that bound our research. It was important that our work was geographically and culturally responsive and timely, as we strived to conduct research with intergenerational and cross-generational cultural imprints. In the spirit of kinship writing and the permanence it enjoys, we remain committed to persistently ask ourselves: What does it mean to create scholarship that transcends time and space? What are the rich kernels of mentorship that help one to (re)imagine their researcher-identity (for both emerging and seasoned scholars)? And to what end should our scholarship and outreach serve? In the next part of this article, we share our reflections on these questions as well as the knowledge and understandings we continue to learn from one another.

“WHAT I AM FIGHTING FOR IN MY WORK . . .”: REFLECTIONS ON OUR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLABORATIVE SCHOLARSHIP

Gholdy and Alfred

As Gholdy began studying the literary writings of Black women, she came upon this quote by Gwendolyn Brooks: “What I’m fighting for now in my work . . . for an expression . . . poems I could take into a tavern, into the street, into the halls of a housing project” (Gayles, 2003, p. 107). This line resonates greatly with both of us because we know our individual scholarship extends beyond the confines of academic institutions and journals. As we read, write, and think of ways to advance the achievement of youth, we approach our work in multipurposeful ways to create scholarship that could transcend time and educational spaces. In doing so, we have translated our work to be present in classrooms, alternative schools, private schools, school districts, and other academic spaces, as well as detention centers, community centers, and bookstores. We argue that this line of thinking should be the essence of our work as educational scholars, especially because we choose to work and study in urban spaces.

Alfred

When I began using sociohistorical frames for my scholarship, it became clear to me that dealing with historically complex and sociologically important topics needed a high level of care and sophistication in order to inform today’s classroom practices. The type of scholarship I was aiming for had to be accessible to classroom teachers who are the daily greeters of Black boys and girls in classrooms throughout the United States. Focusing on the roles of texts in the lives of boys and men became prominent for me. At the time this focus emerged, little scholarly attention was being given to the roles of texts for young males in the literature emerging from research studies, particularly as a way to challenge literacy practices that were occurring in classrooms. In “Engaging African American Males in Reading” (2006, reprinted in this issue), I argued that literacy practices for African American males were ignoring the historical precedent that was established in favor of modern-day iterations that were missing the mark. I viewed this neglected focus on the roles of texts as a serious omission. The voices found in historical texts began to inform my thinking and shape my writing. Not only did I discover more about reading among Black males, I unearthed information about their writings. It is clear from Gholdy’s scholarship that the unearthing has extended to include the writing of Black women, who have their distinct and storied literary traditions. As we move forward, there is more unearthing required that can give birth to modern-day voices as we attempt to nurture the next generation of readers and writers.

Gholdy

When I started my studies at UIC, Alfred was involved in leading summer literacy institutes for Black adolescent males. Not too long after, I began to observe his work and also conceptualize a space for Black girls. Consequently, we led back-to-back institutes with the goals of advancing the achievement of Black girls and boys. From his work with the literacy institutes, Alfred developed a doctoral seminar on the historical literacy development of African American males. In this course, I and other students explored topics in literacy education by excavating historic archives from the 1700s onward. Because I was interested in writing groups, I studied 19th-century literary societies. These literacy groups were first developed by Black men, then Black women created spaces of their own to mediate the pressing issues that were unique to their lives. I quickly became enthralled by the readers and writers of this time and captivated by the ways they talked about their own literacy advancement. The documents I read became a roadmap of what is needed in schools educating African American students today. Alfred pushed me to take historical lenses to my work, and not just for the purpose of framing my research; he taught me the benefit of understanding the history of my discipline to be able to speak broadly about literacy in public spaces. In the first two years
of my academic career, I have taken sociohistorical lenses to my work to understand wider educational contexts and practices. This has been necessary as I suggest what is needed for current instructional practices. An historical perspective also helps me to dispel falsehoods related to many deficit narratives told about the literacies of Black children and instead rely upon our abundant history.

I penned the piece “The Role of Literary Mentors in Writing Development: How African American Women’s Literature Supported the Writings of Adolescent Girls,” published in this issue, to report on the research I conducted to understand how girls appropriate the literary mentorship of Black women. I found it beautifully eerie to discover how the writings of young teenage girls connected so much to Black women’s literary works. The purpose of writing was similar and so were the themes and styles in which they chose to write. At the time I was conducting the case study on which the article is based, I wondered how much the young girls knew of their connected storied lives of women who had come before them. For instance, I found that the girls often wrote about the metaphor of the flower to refer to themselves and other Black women and girls. Traditionally, Black women have written about themselves as flowers, and I wondered how language could translate so transparently across time. Through further exploration of the historical literacy development of African American people, I learned that it is through our kinship, intuition, and spiritual connection that we are able to write in ways that resemble each other across time. I decided to ask the girls in my study to talk about the experience of reading the mentor texts of Black women and how the texts helped to shape their thinking and writing. The findings are quite interesting, but beyond the compelling ways the texts engage the readers are the ways the literary mentors speak to differing ideologies and theories that frame literacy. For example, the girls said that the texts helped them to understand the style and structure of genre (adhering to cognitive theory), make sense of their identities (adhering to sociocultural theory), invoke a response from readers by using critical language (adhering to critical theory), and generate their own ideas for writing (adhering to constructivist theory). Their voices become directives for educators to craft the types of pedagogies they need to advance their literacy education. As I read and write about young Black women and girls, I continue to seek practical ways for classroom teachers to use text for reading and writing to advance girls’ understanding of their multilayered histories, identities, and literacies. In doing so, I remain committed to reorienting classroom spaces to the richness that our history offers.

(Re)Imagining Our Scholarly Signatures. When I was doing my graduate work on identity and what it means for the lives of adolescent youth, I heard Alfred say that, “Identity comprises who you are, who others say you are, and one’s desired/desired selves.” In my own work, and as I conceptualize it further, I am always thinking about tensions that arise among these three areas of identity and what it takes to become the researchers we desire to be. As we are seeking to locate and define our scholarly identities (our “signatures,” as Alfred refers to them), it takes listening to others and knowing how they see us and our potential, because it can be difficult to see this in ourselves, especially as we think about transitioning from graduate work to a tenure-track position and becoming more independent scholars. Alfred was able to see things in me that I had not yet seen in myself, as all strong mentors have the ability to do. I have learned that it is worth listening to others’ perceptions as we are striving to carve our own paths, leading toward who we are destined to be and the impact we will have on the lives of others. Furthermore, we have learned that the development of one’s signature does not cease once scholars reach tenure. Instead it is fluid, changing, and dynamic. As we look forward, we are each enthusiastic about who we will become.

To what end? During my dissertation revisions, Alfred wrote to me in the margins: “You have one critical moment to get this right.” I rested a bit on this language and thought deeply of its meaning. His words taught me that with everything I write, it becomes a critical moment to say something powerful and significant to advance the state of education for youth. Having compelling ideas is not enough for the strides that are needed. Nor is it enough to just have intellectual knowledge of one’s field. We need also to have passion and focused energies as well as a keen understanding of our purpose in academia. As we continue to be accountable to the youth and communities we serve and write about, we must be steadfast about the end or real purpose of our work. The question: To what end? asks us to consider our goals but also, more importantly, implores us to reflect on our real purpose in this world and the type of work we choose to do to advance social conditions for humanity. Alfred’s words also taught me the importance of our writing as scholars. Writing is a craft that allows one to make an imprint on the lives of others, and such imprints are everlasting. So yes, each research talk, each publication, and each professional development session indeed becomes “one critical moment to get it right.” Our writings become our words in action, and we must become changed in the process. This consistent change and growth is what sustains us as scholars and leading thinkers of our time. It keeps us thriving, energized, and motivated to bridge the distant whispers with the echoes in ways in which the burden is lifted from our “wings,” the “cage” diminishes, and the “bird” is free to think, feel, and enact a zeal for change.

Reference

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Using Genre Pedagogy to Teach Adolescent English Learners to Write Academic Persuasive Essays

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ABSTRACT

The new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010) require teachers to prepare all learners, including adolescent English learners (ELs), to develop academic literacy practices. Genre pedagogy may be one way to meet this goal. This article describes an instructional intervention in an urban public high school using the genre-based Reading to Learn (Rose & Martin, 2012) approach to teach 20 adolescent ELs to write academic persuasive essays. Results indicated a significant increase from pretest to posttest in participants’ effective use of key academic linguistic resources that function to create persuasion. The findings suggest that the Reading to Learn approach may support adolescent ELs’ development of academic literacy practices.

INTRODUCTION

Many adolescent English learners (ELs) face a tremendous challenge to use academic English to write in school-valued ways (Schleppegrell, 2004). Yet, the ability to write academic texts is critical for achievement in high school and success in postsecondary studies. The widely adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010) require teachers across disciplines to target the development of academic literacy practices, focusing specifically on language itself, including vocabulary acquisition, conventions of grammar, and knowledge about language (van Lier & Walqui, 2012).

Academic literacy practices can be understood as an application of a deep understanding of the ways that thinking and reasoning and reading and writing are valued in distinct disciplinary areas (Gibbons, 2009). Teachers of all disciplines are now accountable for building learners’ academic literacy practices, engaging learners with more complex texts, and ensuring that all learners are college and career ready (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010). Acquiring this academic language proficiency can be difficult for many adolescent ELs. As Suárez-Orozco, Bang, O’Connor, Gaytan, and Pakes (2010) noted, many immigrant youth struggle to succeed in the educational system of the United States, as evidenced by academic indicators such as achievement tests, grades, dropout rates, and college attendance.

Schleppegrell (2012a) emphasized that academic literacy practices are a prerequisite for participation in society and posited that it is timely that educators have begun to ask what a focus on language can offer in the teaching and learning environment. The CCSS Writing Standards require adolescent learners to produce clear and coherent writing in which textual organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. The CCSS Language Standards stipulate that all learners in Grades 6–12 must be able to apply their knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts and to make effective choices for meaning and style (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010).

Yet, how specific linguistic resources are employed to realize these academic writing goals is left to teachers to decipher. That is, the specific linguistic resources that function to create well-developed, coherent academic texts in school-valued genres are often left invisible to both teachers and learners (Macken-Horarik, 2006; Schleppegrell, 2006). What is quite visible, though, is that the CCSS include ELs in the requirements for content learning through engaging in disciplinary practices and promoting active learning with specific attention to the role of language in academic literacy practices (Valdés, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014).

In recent research investigating writing development across four school genres, including persuasive essays, Beers and Nagy (2011) suggested that one reason for students’ slow acquisition of genre-appropriate linguistic resources may be a lack of writing instruction that includes a focus on the syntactic structures indicative of academic language practices. Moreover, these researchers posited the need for research that investigates how such instruction could be embedded in authentic literacy practices.

Explicit instruction that makes visible the way language functions as a meaning-making resource to create academic, authoritative, and well-organized persuasive essays may support adolescent ELs in learning to both critically read and produce such texts. Furthermore, such explicit instruction can support ELs in learning to shift from spoken-style language use to writing in a more academic style (Derewianka, 2003; Macken-Horarik, 2002). Often, these learners are left unaware that the spoken language used outside of school differs from the academic language practices required to read and write effectively in the genres required in secondary school (Schleppegrell, 2001, 2004).

Drawing on systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), educational linguists have described the power of genre pedagogy for teaching learners how to use genre-appropriate linguistic resources to present content knowledge, enact interpersonal relationships, and organize texts in the academic genres that adolescents must read and write (e.g., Christie, 2002, 2012; Macken-Horarik, 2002, 2006; Rose & Martin, 2012).

Specifically, the genre-based Reading to Learn approach (Rose & Martin, 2012), grounded in SFL and sociocultural theory