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“Joy and Pain” Strategies for Transformative Learning in the English Language Arts Curriculum

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As a child, I would visit my grandmother on Saturday mornings, when she would play the song “Joy and Pain” by Frankie Beverly and Maze in the kitchen while she cooked breakfast. The lyrics of the song “Joy and Pain” derive from a melodious composition by the renowned soul ensemble Maze, established by the talented Frankie Beverly in Philadelphia in the 1970s. The song "Joy and Pain" captures the complex nature of the duality of human existence reflective of historical struggles and triumphs experienced by the Black community, serving as a vessel for shared emotions and resilience.

Significantly, this song held a deep significance for my grandmother, and songs like these present in our kitchen on Saturday mornings transformed her home into the hallowed ground where joy and pain resonated harmoniously. In much the same way, storytelling holds great importance in Black spiritual traditions; my maternal grandmother bestowed upon us narratives echoing this inherent duality of joy intertwining with pain. Through playing a song, my grandmother nurtured a tenacity that I now perceive as an expression of joy as resistance. Black joy activists and theorists argue that Black joy is defined as the use of feelings of joy when the oppressive world doesn't have room for your happiness and the ability to cultivate joy regardless of oppressive factors (Packnett, 2017).

Positionality

As a Black woman, scholar, mother, daughter, and teacher educator in English Language Arts (ELA), my work is deeply influenced by a commitment to foster healing and resilience through culturally responsive and healing-centered pedagogies. Throughout my career, I have taught at various educational levels, worked as a community organizer, and researched integrating culturally responsive teaching and healing-centered approaches to create inclusive and empowering learning environments. My experiences showed me the importance of incorporating healing into the classroom pedagogies and practices to impact student well-being and academic success.

Literature Review: Joy as Resistance in Educational Frameworks

Healing-centered pedagogies are educational approaches that prioritize the well-being and healing of students. These pedagogies go beyond trauma-sensitive methods and aim to create an environment that fosters emotional and mental healing. Integrating practices that promote joy, connection, and cultural responsiveness, healing-centered pedagogies seek to address the emotional needs of students. As a result, healing-centered practitioners hold space for the feelings of discomfort and trauma the curriculum may bring up (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ginwright, 2015). While healing-centered approaches are starting to be commonly used by educators, there is little empirical or qualitative evidence on the

functions of these practices. In addition, even less studied is the role that joy as resistance plays in the effectiveness of delivering a healing-sensitive curriculum.

Newer research in a healing-centered curriculum focuses on joy as a rhetorical strategy for liberation and freedom called "joy as resistance" (Lu, 2019; Joy 2017). "Joy" in this context is used as a nonviolent communal approach to resisting the oppressive conditions of society. This fortitude takes on heightened significance within ELA instruction, where heterogeneous perspectives and tales constitute fundamental elements of a holistic and empowering syllabus. Embracing and comprehending these narratives not only enhances our educational terrain but also fosters a society that is more embracing and understanding. In English education, the ability to adapt and persevere assumes paramount significance. A comprehensive curriculum that empowers students necessitates the inclusion of a myriad of perspectives and narratives. By embracing and comprehending these diverse stories, we not only enhance our educational sphere but also cultivate an all-encompassing society characterized by empathy and inclusivity.

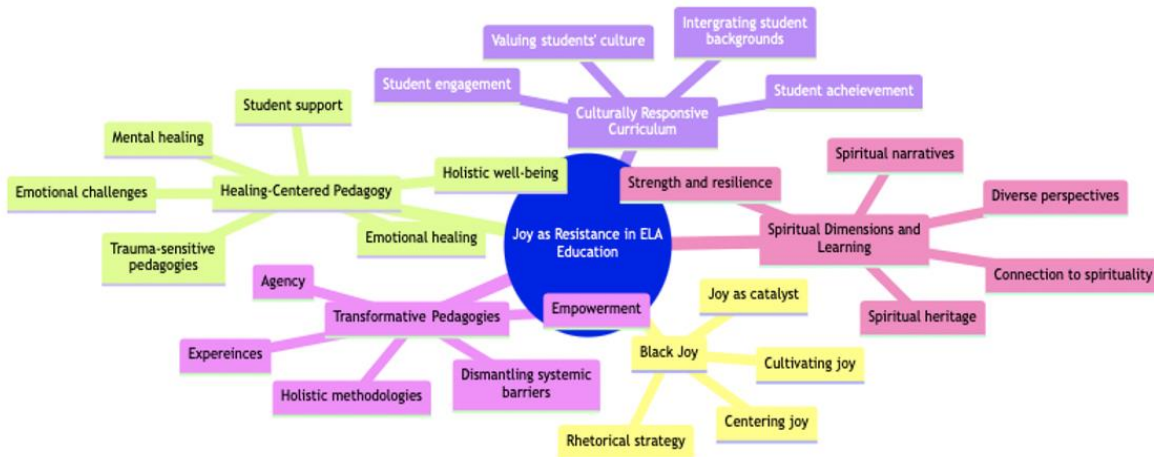
Furthermore, scholarly research emphasizes the crucial role of incorporating student cultures, communities, and diverse perspectives as a fundamental aspect of effective teaching (Gay, 2010). Culture-based pedagogies, advocating for a departure from traditional curriculum structures, have been found to be a significant factor in facilitating student achievement (Gay, 2010). The literature also underscores the need for educators to move beyond exposing students solely to instances of epistemic violence in society by incorporating social justice and trauma-

informed contemplative practices (Kuyken et al., 2013; Lief, 2012). This is particularly relevant in K-12 classrooms, where a primarily white teaching force (NCES, 2019) grapples with the implementation and sustainability of culturally responsive practices, along with the challenge of maintaining an emancipatory curriculum in urban school districts (Borrero, Flores de la Cruz, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Samuels, 2018). Consequently, the current academic discourse increasingly focuses on healing-centered education and practices within educational settings (Ginwright, 2015).

Framework for Joy as Resistance in ELA

In the ELA classroom, the concept of joy as resistance creates a powerful lens through which students can engage with literature, language, and the world around them. The framework is rooted in the idea that joy is not just an emotional state but also a tool for challenging narratives, fostering resilience, creating inclusive environments, and cultivating autonomy. The visual (Figure 1) illustrates how this framework can be operationalized in ELA instruction, including key strategies, outcomes, and theoretical underpinnings that support the integration of joy and resistance as a transformative process. The framework, which extends beyond the instructional techniques, incorporates healing-centered pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, transformative pedagogy, and spiritual dimensions of learning. It draws on the works of Gholdy Muhammad, bell hooks, and Cynthia Dillard to deepen the connection between joy, resistance, and educational practice in the fight against oppression in the cultivation of resilient students.

Figure 1.



The significance of joy in ELA is highlighted in Gholdy Muhammad's seminal work, *Unearthing Joy: A Guide to Culturally and Historically Responsive Teaching and Learning*, where she intricately explores how the cultivation of joy is a radical act of resistance within educational settings (2023). Muhammad underscores the significance of infusing joy into education, particularly for marginalized communities, as it empowers students to assert their identities, navigate challenges, and resist the constraints of oppressive structures that impede their intellectual and emotional growth (Muhammad, 2023).

Further enhancing this framework is the insights of bell hooks, as articulated in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. hooks advocates for the transformative potential of joy in the educational landscape, asserting that it disrupts traditional power dynamics in the classroom and creates a space where marginalized voices can be heard and validated. In the context of ELA, incorporating hooks' perspective reinforces that joy is not merely an emotional state but a deliberate and impactful form of resistance against prevailing educational norms,

allowing for a more inclusive and empowering learning experience.

Cynthia Dillard's (2006) work in *On Spiritual Strivings: Transforming an African American Woman's Academic Life*, offers a perspective on how joy as resistance can be applied as a framework in the realm of ELA. Dillard explores the intersection of spirituality, identity, and academia with insights on how the idea of joyous resistance can live in educational settings (2006). The emphasis on spirituality as a source of strength and resilience draws from the long history of Black culture, where spirituality has been a central pillar of cultural identity and resistance. In the ELA classroom, this can be integrated by incorporating literature that explores diverse spiritual and cultural perspectives so that students can connect with their spiritual heritage and find joy in the exploration of these narratives. Additionally, Dillard's exploration of transformative learning experiences can inform ELA pedagogy to disrupt conventional norms and Eurocentric biases so that students feel liberated to express their unique voices and challenge dominant narratives (2006). The transformative learning Dillard advocates for features the

recognition and affirmation of students through text selection that integrates the emotional realities of students, discussions that acknowledge the spiritual aspects of humans, and texts that contribute joy as resistance by embracing the holistic nature of learning (2006).

Joy in Practice in ELA

Through an exploration of the framework, there are three different strategies that ELA teachers can easily apply to their teaching toolkit. First, incorporating culturally sensitive literature circles allows English teachers to incorporate joy as resistance into their instruction. Through the use of texts (Muhammad, 2023), educators can carefully select literature that reflects the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. Intentional text selection allows students to express their identities, engage in conversations about diverse experiences, and collectively challenge the boundaries of traditional literary norms. By creating culturally sensitive literature circles, teachers create an inclusive environment that values the diversity of opinions in the classroom.

Based on bell hooks' (1994) innovative insights, English teachers can use creative expression as a pedagogical approach. By encouraging students to explore literature through a variety of creative media such as art, poetry, and drama, educators disrupt traditional power relationships and create fun and inclusive learning environments (hooks 1994). This approach is not only consistent with the idea that joy is a conscious form of resistance but also allows students to transcend the boundaries of traditional education. Through creative expression, students can enhance their interpretations of texts, share personal stories, and engage with literary themes in ways that closely fit their unique perspectives.

By incorporating Cynthia Dillard's (2006) perspective on spirituality as a source of resilience, English teachers can enrich their curriculum by integrating spiritual stories and personal testimonies. The inclusion of texts that explore different spiritual perspectives is consistent with Dillard's emphasis on recognizing the spiritual aspects of learning (2006). Additionally, providing a platform for students to share their testimonies, whether related to spirituality or personal growth, can be a joyful act of resistance. By filling the curriculum with stories that embrace the holistic nature of learning, educators actively participate in the framework of joy as resistance in ELA, creating an empathetic and understanding classroom community.

Sending You to Your Joy: Reflective Practice

In conclusion, joy as resistance in ELA can show a profound and transformative framework for educators and practitioners. Through each of the scholar's perspectives (hooks, 1994; Dillard, 2006; Muhammad, 2023), there is a deliberative centering and understanding of the impact of joy as an act of resistance against oppressive educational settings. Incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy, fostering transformative pedagogies, and recognizing the cultural spiritual dimensions of learning are strategies that educators can actively engage with in a joyful resistance that empowers students, amplifies diverse voices, and establishes inclusive learning environments. This framework challenges traditional education paradigms, through the centering of more holistic and inclusive methodologies. I believe this framework calls for educators to not only actively embrace diverse perspectives and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity, but also provide students with an opportunity to connect with their narratives. The centering

of joy as resistance can transform the ELA curriculum into a catalyst for empowerment, agency, and transformative experiences.

I hope practitioners begin to recognize that joy is not just an emotional state but a dynamic force that disrupts traditional power dynamics, challenges exclusionary structures, and fosters resilience in the face of adversity. In weaving together, the insights of bell hooks, Gholdy Muhammad, and Cynthia Dillard and the broader framework of joy as resistance, educators will be better prepared to navigate and reshape the narratives in the ELA discipline. Through embracing this transformative approach, teachers will lay the foundation for an educational landscape that nurtures with the capacity to find joy even in the face of challenges, embodying the resilience and empowerment reflective of broader Black American experiences, as heard in those soulful Saturday mornings in my grandmother's kitchen to the tune of Maze.

Questions for Reflective Practice

1. How can I incorporate more culturally responsive texts into my curriculum that highlight the themes of joy and resistance into my curriculum?
2. In what ways can creative expression be used to help students explore and express joy as a form of resistance in their engagement with literature?
3. How can I create a classroom environment that celebrates and integrates students' experiences of joy and resistance in their spiritual or personal narratives?
4. What specific strategies can I implement to foster and highlight joy within my teaching?

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