Black Genius Framework and Elements

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Six years ago, Village of Wisdom (VOW) recognized the need to engage the expertise and wisdom of Black parents in identifying elements of culturally affirming learning environments. To date, few school interventions transform the learning environments Black students navigate (e.g., the public education system), and, more often, such interventions direct efforts toward changing students. School interventions have also yet to reduce the discrimination and psychological harm Black students experience in public schools (Cogburn, Chavous, & Griffin, 2011; Henderson et al., 2019; Umaña-Taylor, 2016). Building learning environments that culturally affirm Black students reduces psychological harm and will allow Black students to thrive. Grounded in the wisdom of Black parents, further validated through a review of the literature and piloting in schools, the Black Genius Framework is a framework for educators and school districts. The Black Genius Framework is an integrative model comprising six elements: Interest Awareness, Can-Do Attitude, Multicultural Navigation, Racial Identity, Selective Trust, and Social Justice. This paper is an overview of the Black Genius elements.

Interest Awareness Element

Four decades of research demonstrates that sustained interest and improved performance is more often associated with intrinsic motivation versus extrinsic motivation (Carasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Studies also note that academic tasks associated with intrinsic motivators, like a need for purpose, are more likely to sustain a student's interest in the presence of difficulty (Freeman et al., 2014; Pierre-Yves, Gottlieb, & Lopes, 2016). The Black Genius Element of Interest Awareness centers learning around intrinsic motivators like a need for purpose, a need for personal discovery and enjoyment. When educators tap into a student's interests, they can leverage learning and academic tasks consistent with curiosities and these internal motivations. For example, a student who finds purpose in taking care of animals may be more inclined to learn about math when a math task relates to animals or integrates this interest. Educators are encouraged to foster a deep awareness of Black students' interests, motivators and to connect these motivators to a need to see a more just world (Social Justice Element).

Can-Do Attitude Element

Research indicates those young people who project a growth mindset are able to take on new challenges and engage in more perspective-taking (Anronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Dweck, 2008). The Black Genius Element of Can-Do Attitude aligns with the growth mindset literature and counters the "can't do" messages often communicated to Black students. The previous work of Aronson, Fried, and Good (2002) found that a growth mindset may be particularly valuable to groups who deal with negative stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is an observed and documented phenomenon where certain students of color underperform on certain academic tasks due to their perceptions that people hold negative stereotypes about their racial group's ability. Aronson and colleagues (2002) demonstrated that when Black students were encouraged to embrace the idea that intelligence is not a fixed capacity, they tended to perform better on academic tests. Educators can foster a "can-do attitude" when they gain a deeper awareness of students' interests (Interest Awareness Element) and when they connect learning to purpose and meaning. Beasley (2011) concluded in a previous study that improvements in students' can-do attitude, such as a need to overcome challenges and continue to grow from them, was also closely related to a need to see racial justice (Social Justice Element).

Racial Identity Element

Two decades of research has solidified and validated the essential role a positive racial identity plays in academic performance and educational aspirations (Jones & Neblett, 2017; Neblett et al., 2006; Stevenson, 2014). The Black Genius Element of Racial Identity centers on positive racial socialization messages, representation, and positive racial role models in the learning environment. When young people receive positive racial socialization messages (e.g., "you can be Black and proud"), see themselves represented in the learning environment, and have positive racial role models, they begin to construct a more positive sense of self and a more positive view toward their racial group (Stevenson, 2014). Previous research conducted by Neblett and colleagues (2006) found that Black students who received a relatively high number of racially affirming messages from their parents were more likely to have a higher regard for themselves and perform better academically. Educators must learn how to use positive racial socialization messages in the classroom and to do this in authentic and genuine ways (Selective Trust Element). Additionally, curricular content that integrates the intellectual contributions of Black people and promotes a deep awareness of and appreciation for diverse cultural worldviews promotes a positive racial identity but also fosters an increased appreciation of other worldviews (Multicultural Navigation Element).

Multicultural Navigation Element

Johnson (2015) proposes that transitioning across and adapting to cultural and social contexts is vital to our success. Social adaptation has been found to be vital to how Black students navigate the public education system with some degree of success (Dungar et al., 2017). The culture and

norms found in the public education system often differ from the home environment of Black students, and the school environment can signal a need to adapt accordingly (American Psychological Association, 2003; Boykin et al., 2005; Gay, 2000; Pai, Adler, & Shadow, 2006; Rouland et al., 2014; Tyler et al., 2009). The Black Genius Element of Multicultural Navigation captures the need for all students to adapt and navigate contexts that reflect different cultural realities and worldviews. Adaptation and navigation does not ask Black students to shed aspects of their identity but it involves educators supporting how Black students gain an awareness of the expectations and strategies useful for public schools' success. This awareness develops when students are exposed to and become familiar with diverse cultural identities and worldviews and when schools integrate and value diverse cultural worldviews beyond white norms. Creating learning opportunities for young people to build trusting relationships with individuals from different cultural experiences and worldviews (Selective Trust Element) increases empathy toward others.

Selective Trust Element

Trust is a foundational pillar to any relationship and needs to be nurtured in the learning environment if schools seek to support the successful transition of young people from familiarity (e.g., the home environment) into unfamiliar contexts and interactions with new adults. The Black Genius Element of Selective Trust acknowledges that students of color are selective in building trust; their need to be selective comes from an intergenerational history of violence and mistreatment in U.S. institutions (e.g., the public education and the health and medical system). Establishing trust with young people is essential to building genuine and lasting relationships (Brown, 2006). Trust is also a foundational pillar to feeling a sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007). When young people have a high sense of belonging to adults outside their immediate family and when adults in these relationships convey affirming messages, young people begin to experience a more positive sense of self (Henderson & McClinton, 2016; Henderson et al., 2020). Walton and Cohen (2007) previously noted that Black students value this sense of belonging in school, and this sense of belonging can significantly improve their academic performance. Ultimately, student-teacher relationships embedded in trust create a foundation for students to become more excited to learn and a desire to achieve academic success (Scales et al.,2020). Educators can foster selective trust with Black students when they take a deep interest in the student's motivations (Interest Awareness Element) and value the abilities, contributions and realities of students (Racial Identity Element).

Social Justice Element

Infusing social justice into the learning environment has a foundation in culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). More than two decades of research supports the use of culturally responsive and affirming practices in improving student outcomes. The Black Genius Element of Social Justice or the "Genius" Element centers on creating learning environments

where young people develop an awareness of social injustice and develop an orientation toward justice by learning to address social issues impacting their neighborhood or community. Several studies have found that interventions that infuse social justice learning into programming increase students' positive attitudes toward education, problem-solving skills, and positive identity development (Berg et al., 2009; Hope, Hoggard & Thomas, 2015; Morrell, 2007; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Watts et al., 2003). Other scholars note that a desire towards "learning and working for social change" persists well beyond adolescence and into early adulthood for students of color (Beasley, 2011; Gibbs & Griffin, 2013; Garibay, 2015; McGee & Bentley, 2017). Integrating the social justice element (e.g., instruction focused on issues of equity and justice) into instruction can reveal a student's motivations (Interest Awareness) while also affirming a student's positive sense of self (Racial Identity Element).

Summary

The focus and amalgamation of the six elements of the Black Genius Framework are embedded in the cultural realities of Black parents and the lived experiences of Black students navigating public schools in the U.S. The six elements are integrative and inform how educators model the practice of teaching and how they design and implement learning strategies. The six elements work in tandem; for example, it will be difficult to promote a "can-do attitude" without considering the social justice and interest awareness elements. Black students may feel more interested in learning content and feel the need to succeed in learning tasks when they relate learning to solving problems in their neighborhood or community. Similarly, presenting Black sheroes and heroes who fought for justice or against social rights can affirm a positive racial identity. When educators adopt the Black Genius Framework into their practice, use the framework to design learning strategies , they are able to build culturally affirming learning environments. Village of Wisdom (VOW) encourages school districts and educators to adopt the Black Genius Framework and to continue finding ways to affirm and protect the dreams, talents and assets of Black students.

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