

## **Teaching With Joy: Centering Generational Asset-Based Pedagogies for Black and Brown Youth**

By Raven Jones Stanbrough, Michigan State University, United States

A few weeks ago, on the eve of my birthday, my 6-year-old daughter, Zuri Hudson Stanbrough asked me when I first knew I wanted to become a teacher. Moments prior to her inquiring, we were sharing with each other why we are grateful for one another. Without hesitation, she shared that she thinks I am a kind teacher and that she is happy she is still being homeschooled, despite the challenges of COVID-19 and the pandemic. Following this, she smiled even harder when she asserted that she really loves when I make her peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I hugged her and told her that I knew I was going to become a teacher when I was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Her eyes grew big. After chewing her goldfish crackers, she pondered, “Mom, do you think I would be a good teacher?” “Girl, Bye – you would be a super dope teacher,” I said. Her embrace grew tighter. Next, I reminded her that she is more than capable of thriving in any career she gives life to. I also shared that many of my favorite teachers have not always had easy days, but they continue(d) to pursue what they love. Related to this, I gleefully reminded Zuri Hudson that she is named after my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, Ms. Faye Hudson, a Detroit teaching legend and Black woman – whom I still draw inspiration from each time we reflect on my 8-year-old self, and discuss everything in life. Likewise, Zuri Hudson is aware that she was named by my dear sister-friend and fellow Detroiter, Dr. April Baker-Bell, while we were navigating our doctoral programs and engaging in endless carpool conversations about empathy and social justice. For me, it is essential to be transparent with my baby girl and to surround her with stories and counterstories that advance her thinking, creativity, and Blackness. Ms. Hudson is my teaching muse and I find myself teaching my daughter the same lessons Ms. Hudson taught me, including how to rise above severe adversity and triumph over challenge, especially when teaching and becoming a champion for children. I am committed to teaching and empowering children and youth to speak truth to power. In Bettina Love’s (2019) *We Want To Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist*

*Thinking and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, she posits, “Abolitionist teaching is the practice of working in solidarity in communities of color while drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of abolitionists to eradicate injustice in and outside of schools” (p. 2). This is what I seek to do daily, while explaining to my inquisitive daughter that she too can begin this work - even when she is playing with her Black Barbie dolls or writing sentences about fairness.

### **Demographics, Desires, and Dedication**

As a teacher educator, activist, and mother-scholar, I am constantly concerned about the state of education. There is widespread concern about providing equitable literacy and learning opportunities for today’s youth; namely, Black youth. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), students of color are now the majority in public schools across the United States. Additionally, with

each passing year, more and more non-White students will continue to occupy classrooms nationally. However, even with the current racial demographic change, African-American students and other students of color are still being taught and educated with limited or nonexistent resources. Further, the practices and pedagogies used to teach Black and Brown students tend to devalue and silence their experiences and voices. To push against this deficit-framed positioning, Paris (2012) proposes these questions for educators and other concerned allies that push us to think of ways in which we might value the lives of Black and Brown young people: “(1) How can we prepare teachers to enact pedagogies that meet the needs of the new mainstream – students of

color characterized by multilingualism, multiculturalism, and the desire to strive toward equality in an unequal and shifting racially and ethnically diverse society? and (2) Who are the teachers already meeting those needs,



*Figure 1. Zuri Hudson Stanbrough and the author, outside of the author's elementary school, Holcomb Elementary School in Detroit, Michigan*

how are they doing so, and, crucially for the field of teacher education, how are they learning to do so” (p. 5)? With such imperative and necessary thinking, Paris’s inquiries call for the teaching field to be constantly thinking and doing, as it relates to equitable options that affirm African-American students and other students of color. In reflecting on this, I can now appreciate how Ms. Hudson was enacting such pedagogies and was a direct representation of engaging in culturally responsive teaching with my peers and me. Children all across the globe deserve caring teachers. They deserve to be taught from individuals who see them, value their intersecting identities, and center their innate genius. We all must do our part to ensure that educators are equipped to teach from asset-based pedagogies.

### **Teaching Teachers How To Teach**

I fell deeply in love with words and teaching when I was in the 3rd grade. It was the late 80s and I was in Ms. Hudson’s class in Detroit, Michigan. She was known throughout the entire school for having a reputation of demanding excellence and calling a child’s parent right in the middle of a lesson if they were misbehaving. Likewise, she was also revered for knowing her students’ names and stories. Ms. Hudson did not only call home to share bad news with parents or wait for parent-teacher conferences – she was a champion of children every single day and communicated her joy to anyone who would listen. Although my learning took place in her outdoor portable classroom, which resembled a mobile home – that year of learning was full of warmth, love, and endless encouragement. It was the kind of equitable teaching and learning that I desire for every student to experience and be enveloped by. With the indoor walls covered in charts with synonyms, the parts of speech, classroom rules, and artwork created by my peers and me, Ms. Hudson taught us from her soul. Daily, we were instructed to recite affirmations aloud and in unison, and we sometimes echoed like a high-pitched, soprano-only children’s choir. Still, even our off-key reverberations were music to her ears. Similarly, Ms. Hudson taught us about Blackness and to appreciate our culture. Our class was comprised of mostly Black students, so I believe this was intentional on her part. We listened to music from Motown as we wrote rough drafts regarding our future career plans, identified quadrilaterals, and hypothesized about scientific experiments. Although small in stature, Ms. Hudson offered boisterous and resounding praises to her students. My 3<sup>rd</sup> grade experience was super LIT! Ms. Hudson was engaging and told me

I was special and that my writing was amazing. When I told her I wanted to be a teacher like her, she always smiled and hugged me. My peers and I felt affirmed in Ms. Hudson's class. It was an honor to learn proper nouns, write multiple 5-paragraph essays, and read the works of Black authors and poets. bell hooks (1994) states, "If we give our children sound self-love, they will be able to deal with whatever life puts before them" (p. 6). hooks, Paris, Love, and Ms. Hudson are all declaring for us to love and see children, to honor their cultures, languages, and literacies, and to fight for them.

### **"And Life For Me Ain't Been No Crystal Stair..."**

Ms. Hudson and I are Libra women and have birthdays four days apart. Every year, she mails me a card and on the inside of it, she always shares throwback memories she has of me from sitting in the front row of her classroom. I cry tears of joy each year from listening and hanging onto her every word. Although she is retired now, after teaching for over 30 years in Detroit Public Schools, she is still committed to Detroit's youth and continues to inspire generations of students. Each time we talk on the phone, she encourages my heart and asserts, "Keep teaching, Raven!" We reflect on our teaching stories of struggles and success, and when Zuri Hudson and I visit her at her home, they read together. We recite poetry and share our appreciation for the show *Law & Order* and the poet Langston Hughes. In particular, we chorally recite Hughes' (1926) poem, *Mother to Son*. The poem is about a mother giving a son advice about life and encouraging him not to give up, despite whatever hardships he may endure. With vivid imagery and figurative language, she tells her son that he must not look back; he must persist. I am now beginning to teach these words and ideas to my own daughter. Deeply inspired by Hughes's thoughts, below, I share an iteration I wrote to my daughter, in an effort to remind her that while trouble may come, it does not last always. Every day, I teach her to believe in herself and to fight for herself – even when the stairs she may climb are not crystal. As thinkers, educators, activists, parents, students, community members, and policy makers, I invite us all to climb together in the pursuit of educational justice and freedom.

***Mother to Daughter: Thank You, Baby Girl!***

(Inspired by Langston Hughes's *Mother to Son*)

Well *Baby Girl*, let me be clear:

Life for me continues to be an everyday struggle.

It's filled with racism for breakfast,

And other isms for lunch, dinner, and midnight snacks,

And microaggressions that cause my ever-flowing and salty tears,

And Detroit potholes at every turn –

Broken.

But forevermore,

I'll get up after every blow, bullet, and bout of bullshit.

And aim for creative greatness,

And perfect peace,

And sometimes (un)knowingly entertain (d)evils,

To show them that my Black womanly-ness is equivalent to Andre 3000's smile.

So *Baby Girl*, don't surround yourself with \_\_\_\_\_ fools.

Don't wave at silly boys or men,

'Cause I did that shit already.

Don't wear defeat as Sunday's best –

For I'se still movin', *Baby Girl*,

I'se still prayin',

And life for me continues to be an everyday struggle.

## References

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