

Abolitionist Teaching: What It Is, Why It's Important, and How You Can Help

Feature



by Frankie Pinckney, October 2020

As information professionals, we should take time to make ourselves aware of the impact we have on those we interact with. Recently, I viewed a discussion about abolitionist teaching, presented by Haymarket Books. Abolitionist teaching is the act of tearing down old ways of thinking and teaching, then replacing them with a new, more equitable education system where children of all races can succeed. The participants in the discussion, Brian Jones, Associate Director of Education at the Schomburg Center; Gholdy Muhammed, Associate Professor at Georgia State University; Dena Simmons, Assistant Director at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence; and Bettina Love from the University of Georgia each shared their personal experiences as well as the issues they believe should be addressed within the education system. The most memorable experience was from Bettina L. Love, Georgia Athletic Association Professor in Education, University of Georgia, Mary Frances Early College of Education.

Dr. Love spoke about her experience as an athlete on a college scholarship. She noticed that she never saw her Caucasian teammates in classes with her. She found out that they were in courses like biology while she was taking a semester-long first-aid class. When Dr. Love asked her advisors why she was advised to be in those courses, the only reason they offered was that this was the best track for student athletes from inner-city schools. She expressed that this was the moment when she realized abolitionist teaching needed to happen. From there, I began to reflect on my own experiences.

In elementary school, I participated in a spelling bee and did so well that I made it to the district level. When I misspelled the word "exaggerate," I distinctively remember hearing teachers talk among themselves as I returned to my seat. They were saying that I was so smart for a black girl and they were impressed that I had made it this far. That day has stuck with me throughout my education, and I am reminded of it each time I make a mistake. After hearing that conversation, I began to question myself and my worth as a student. I wondered why it was so surprising that a black girl could be smart. Was I supposed to be dumb? Is this why I never see other black people in my textbooks, is it because we are all too dumb to be included? Looking back, that was the moment when I realized abolitionist teaching needed to happen, but I just did not know the term at the time. The panelists spoke about spirit murdering of students of color; for me this also started at that moment.

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The unfortunate thing about my experience and the experience of Dr. Love is that too many children of color can say they have had similar ones. It can be extremely difficult to learn when you know your teachers do not expect you to succeed. Realizing this made me wonder how I can make a difference in my classroom now and in the future as a librarian. I decided that reading Dr. Love's book would be a great place to start.

Dr. Love's book, *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Beacon Press, 2019) shares a collection of events that support her argument for the need of abolitionist teaching. Through these events, the book gives readers insight on the inequalities that students of color face within the education system. I have held conversations with people who are in denial about the recurring issues that children of color face. The events she shares makes it indisputable that children of color have dealt with inequality for years.

One example Dr. Love shares was the experience of English as a second language (ESL) students. She explained that students would take an assessment that is only administered in English, which causes ESL students to regularly fail the assessment. One way that we can support the abolitionist teaching movement in the classroom is to

advocate for the removal of standardized testing. All too often students are held to the same standard regardless of their backgrounds. This causes students who are already disenfranchised to remain that way because the learning gap is never closed.

Another incident from Dr. Love's book was the story of Vanessa Van Dyke and her natural hair, which Love used as an example of spirit murdering. Vanessa was twelve years old when her school threatened to expel her because of her hair. They referred to her hair as a distraction. If this is not an example of inequality, then there are none. Why should a young girl be at risk of losing her education because she chooses to wear her natural hair?

Abolitionist teaching extends from the classroom to the library in many ways. Our libraries can be used to prevent situations like the one Vanessa experienced. They should provide resources that share information about different races and cultures so we can remove the fear of the unknown. It is essential when selecting diverse materials, that they should be written by individuals who are members of these communities to prevent misrepresentation. Promoting and sharing multi-ethnic content beginning with the youngest of students can support the process of breaking down barriers and racial stereotypes.

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If you open almost any history book in an American classroom, you will see that it is centered around the white experience. Abolitionist teaching promotes the inclusion of all races in textbooks to broaden students' knowledge about narratives of the diverse people of this country. School curriculums follow this same pattern as they are not created to support the black experience. Black students rarely see themselves in the curriculum they are being taught in schools. When they do, they only see the slaves despite the numerous contributions black people have made in this country. Aside from being portrayed as slaves, black children will see themselves in textbooks as common civil rights figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. Usually the list stops there, leaving children in our school systems to believe that this is the summation of the black contribution. This also leads our black children to believe that they are nothing more than "the help" or a part of an endless struggle.

Abolitionist teaching can improve education for all students, not just the disenfranchised and students of color. It can allow children of color to learn more about who they are in general and remove biased measurements of success within the school system. It will also provide white students with the opportunity to see their black peers in a more positive light by raising social awareness and teaching all students how to navigate racism.

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