

RE- IMAGINING EDUCATION



TEACHING FOR TODAY'S
DIVERSE AMERICA

BY JOE LEVINE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEBORAH FEINGOLD

“So last night we’re sitting there, and the process is *happening*.” Christopher Emdin, Teachers College’s internationally renowned hip-hop educator, is telling attendees at the College’s second annual Re-imagining Education Summer Institute about the birth of his son, Malcolm. This wasn’t the plan: Emdin was supposed to introduce teenagers from his Science Genius competition to rap about physics and other science topics. They didn’t show, guessing the new father might have other concerns. 

SHEDDING A BAD RAP Hip hop can be a powerful means for reengagement with formal education, helping young people to construct an identity that changes what may have been a traumatic relationship to school and uniting them with disciplines that they do, in fact, have an aptitude for, such as science and math. Here: five students from New York City’s Validus Preparatory Academy who won the most recent Science Genius competition, which was created in 2012 by TC Associate Professor of Science Education Christopher Emdin with the hip-hop star GZA. From left: Mohammed Issafou, Derek Montero, Bryan Hernandez, Christopher Diaz and Christopher Rosario.







But Emdin, geek-cool in thick black spectacles, white blazer and sneakers, is unfazed, charming some 300 educators from 20 states and four countries with his signature blend of street cadence and academese — part Kendrick Lamar and part Dwayne Wayne:

“So my wife and I are grabbing each other’s hands, and then, you know, Malcolm comes into the world. And the doctor’s, like, ‘Do you hear his first cry?’” Emdin beams in imitation. “And I was, like, ‘No. I hear his first *note*.’ Because for me, he’s telling the ancestors, ‘I am here.’ And when you frame this chorus that’s in tune with the cosmos as only a cry — right? — you misunderstand the whole experience.”

Malcolm’s song is like “that first, almost guttural, natural expression of young people in the classroom.” Emdin’s inspiration to teach through hip hop resulted from “going into the schools, where kids were completely disengaged, and then seeing them outside, anything but disengaged,” and realizing that “the construction of their own vernacular — not English or Spanish or Spanglish, but uniquely uptown and breaking every law of what is established — is beautiful.”

 **PERSISTENT PROBLEM**

Implicit in most theories of America’s “achievement gap” is the assumption that students of color have

“**A**FTER THE SUPREME COURT STRUCK DOWN SCHOOL SEGREGATION, ALL THE TEACHERS IN BLACK SCHOOLS WERE FIRED. NOW TC’S FACULTY ARE REBUILDING THAT KNOWLEDGE BASE.”

— Amy Stuart Wells

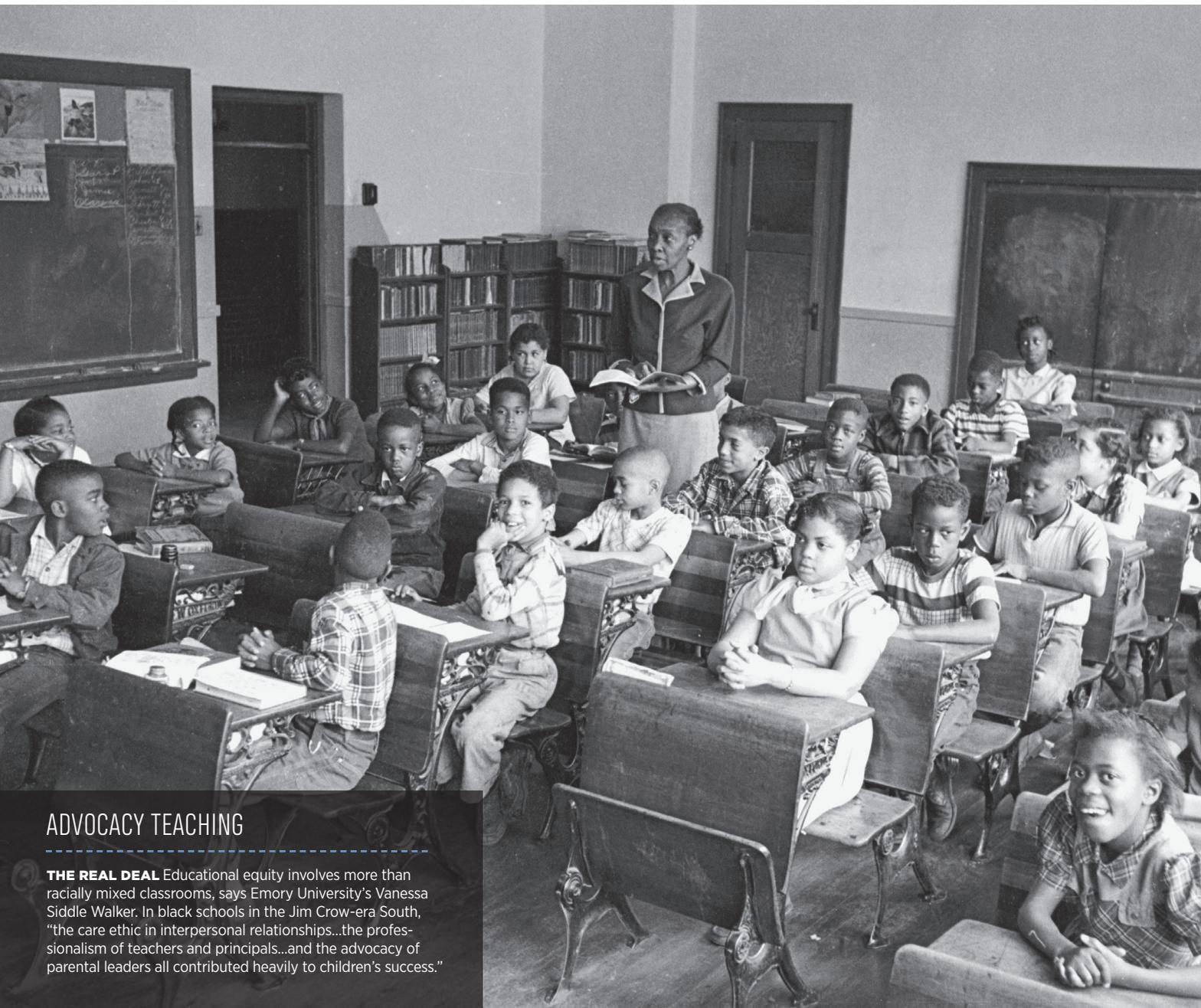
been denied the opportunity to develop skills or enjoy learning experiences essential for success in school and life. But there’s another school of thought: that all children possess talents and insights, and that an education system that’s blind to them badly needs what Emdin calls a remix. The U.S. education system’s intensive focus on narrow measures of ability — especially standardized testing in reading and math — profoundly limits society’s appreciation of many students and educators. Students of color whose cultural knowledge may fall outside the “norm” are penalized most.

At the Reimagining Institute — created by TC



Mining History as It Repeats Itself

In her book *Learning in a Burning House: Educational Inequality, Ideology, and (Dis)Integration*, Sonya Douglass Horsford interviews retired black school superintendents who witnessed, in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s words, students achieving “physical proximity, but not spiritual affinity.” Horsford explores black education, leadership and policy in education’s “new Jim Crow,” a term previously applied to criminal justice by scholar Michelle Alexander.



ADVOCACY TEACHING

THE REAL DEAL Educational equity involves more than racially mixed classrooms, says Emory University's Vanessa Siddle Walker. In black schools in the Jim Crow-era South, "the care ethic in interpersonal relationships...the professionalism of teachers and principals...and the advocacy of parental leaders all contributed heavily to children's success."

faculty members and students across five departments and subtitled "Teaching and Learning in Racially Diverse Schools" — the emphasis was on broadening those norms to embrace an increasingly diverse school-aged population and nation.

"When we talk about urban education it's always, 'Young folks of color are underperforming on assessments,'" Emdin said. "But we've never allowed them to believe they're smart, so every piece of data is flawed."

The conference's underlying premise: To make sub-

ject matter relevant for America's students, the majority of whom are of color, the white adults who constitute 80 percent of the teaching force must become observers, confidantes, advocates and caregivers.

"Children of color are being failed by schools," says Mariana Souto-Manning, Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education. "Their images and experiences are not central to curriculum and teaching. Their rich family and community knowledge is missing. Their voices, stories and languages are often silenced. They are being marginalized."



“CHILDREN OF COLOR ARE BEING FAILED BY SCHOOLS. THEIR IMAGES AND EXPERIENCES ARE NOT CENTRAL TO CURRICULUM AND TEACHING. THEY ARE BEING MARGINALIZED.”

— Mariana Souto-Manning

To realize the democratic aims of schooling, Souto-Manning says, “schools must undo injustices rooted in racism and other oppressions. A starting point is to center teaching and learning on the values, experiences and assets of diverse families and communities. Teachers can affirm the brilliance of students of color.”

Schools can also address racism and classism head on. “Whether or not we agree with the Black Lives Matter movement, or with what’s happening with immigration and deportation, our students are grappling with it,” says

Michelle Knight-Manuel, Professor of Education and Associate Dean. “So how can we prepare them to do that in ways that don’t further divide us?”

These arguments have been made before by theorists such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, James Banks, Sonia Nieto, Luis Moll, Carl Grant and Geneva Gay. But Emdin, Souto-Manning, Knight-Manuel and others at TC are providing guidance on how to implement them in 21st century classrooms. They’re harkening back to John Dewey by more closely connecting curriculum to students’ lived experi-

ences — for example, through math lessons imparted by elders or by asking fifth graders to think about police killings of black men.

“For years, lawyers and policymakers who didn’t understand teaching and learning led school desegregation,” says Reimagining director Amy Stuart Wells, TC Professor of Sociology & Education. “They created policies that technically ‘desegregated’ schools but didn’t meaningfully integrate curriculum and pedagogy. After the Supreme Court struck down school segregation, all the teachers in black schools were fired. Now TC’s faculty are rebuilding that knowledge base. They’re recreating progressive education with a grounding in child development, because you can’t teach without understanding what children are going through.”

The equity argument for diversity “frequently begins and ends with whether schools are integrated or segregated,” Emory University education historian Vanessa Siddle Walker said at the Reimagining conference. Yet “the care ethic in interpersonal relationships and institutional structures, the professionalism of teachers and principals in school and networked collaboration, and the advocacy of parental leaders all contributed to children’s success in Southern segregated schools.” Recalling that TC welcomed aspiring Southern black teachers during the Jim Crow era, Walker added that attending TC’s conference was like “watching the past and the present intersect.”



THE NON-NEUTRAL CLASSROOM

Most textbooks still portray Christopher Columbus as a heroic explorer and conqueror. Two years ago on Columbus Day (now Indigenous People’s Day in some

U.S. cities), New York City teachers Jessica Martell and Abigail Salas Maguire, working with Mariana Souto-Manning, offered an alternative perspective through story acting. While Martell’s second-graders were at gym, Maguire’s fourth-graders occupied their classroom. A video clip shown at the Reimagining conference captures the returning students’ dismay and the ensuing critical dialogue.

“This carefully designed learning experience led to a meaningful conversation,” says Souto-Manning, co-author with Maguire, Martell and two other teachers, Carmen Lugo Llerena and Alicia Arce-Boardman, of *No More Culturally Irrelevant Teaching* (Heinemann 2018).

“Students not only better understood Columbus Day but questioned why New York City schools observe this holiday. One said Columbus created slavery, or at least brought it to America. Another asked, ‘How can you discover something that’s already there?’ And another said, ‘Did Columbus speak the same language as the indigenous peoples? If not, the story he told isn’t true.’”

The Columbus Day exercise exemplifies culturally relevant teaching (CRT), an approach advanced by

CONTESTED LEGACY

DISCOVERER OR OCCUPIER?

Columbus Day celebrates the explorer as a hero, but the occasion has triggered a growing number of protests, and some major American cities now observe “Indigenous People’s Day” instead. Culturally relevant teaching such as story acting, championed by TC’s Mariana Souto-Manning, allows children to consider other perspectives.



Real-World Curriculum

Some teachers worry about introducing politically and racially charged topics, but all classrooms are political, says TC’s Detra Price-Dennis, who has created a curriculum in which fifth-grade girls probe police killings of black men. “The books on your shelves tell kids what’s valued and what isn’t. So you’re not *bringing* race into the classroom. Kids are already racialized beings.”

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Gloria Ladson-Billings that is grounded in high expectations and support. CRT hones students’ “competence” in their own cultures and at least one other. It develops engaged citizens by fostering their “critical consciousness” to challenge historic racial, linguistic and socioeconomic inequities that have been baked into the system.

Similarly, Detra Price-Dennis, Assistant Professor of Education, helps teachers help kids understand the racial politics and historical context of books and online content. She’s also concerned with validating children’s “literacies” — “the multiple ways of knowing [they] draw on to not only read, write, speak and act in academic spaces but [also] to make sense of and write their worlds.”

In an award-winning study, Price-Dennis created a Common Core-aligned curriculum in which black fifth-grade girls created mini-memoirs and penned their hopes and dreams for a classroom display. They read news reports and viewed images of Freddie Gray, the Baltimore man whose death in city police custody sparked upheaval in April 2015, and participated in classroom and online discussion.

“Any classroom is political,” Price-Dennis says.

“The books on your shelves reflect choices about what’s necessary for kids’ development. They tell kids what’s valued and what isn’t. So you’re not *bringing* race into the classroom. Kids are already racialized beings — that’s how people engage them in the world. When they see hashtags like Black Lives Matter, they’re concerned — why do we need that?”



Older students are able to consider such issues in a broader historical context.

“The segregated American city is no accident,” Ansley Erickson, Associate Professor of History & Education, told teachers at the Reimagining conference. “It’s not just ‘where people choose to live,’ and segregated schools aren’t just ‘where people feel like sending their kids.’”

Rather, banks created and reinforced segregation through the government-sanctioned practice of redlining, or denying loans to black families or neighborhoods. Federal maps documenting redlining, once the province of scholars and librarians, are now available on websites such as Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America.

Students learn technology skills working with such materials, Price-Dennis says. They also raise their scholarly game because they care about the subject: “When students access all the tools and become better engaged, that’s magical.”

FIGHTING STEREOTYPES WITH CULTURAL RELEVANCE

When Chris Emdin went out to eat recently with childhood friends, they handed him the bill. Again.

HIP-HOP HELP

SKEWED Students of color are pigeon-holed as underperforming on assessments, “but we’ve never allowed them to believe they’re smart, so every piece of data is flawed,” Chris Emdin says (*at left, center*). Hip hop can help young people construct an identity that doesn’t separate them from disciplines such as science and math.

“I’m a teacher, so most of ‘em make more than me. But no one wants to say, ‘I’m 35 and I can’t do long division.’”

Emdin believes “the educator’s work is to undo the damage caused by school” — especially in science, which is “perceived to be for the best and brightest.” Students of color “have always been perceived to not be that, so they construct an identity that separates them from a discipline they have the intellect to do well in.”

Similarly, stereotypes about mathematics and who has math potential make too many people believe math is beyond their reach. Erica Walker, Professor of Mathematics Education, explores how

early socialization around math concepts in and out of school can help develop interest, engagement and understanding. Walker often shows a video of Duane Cooper, Chair of the Mathematics Department at historically black Morehouse College, recalling the brain teasers his grandfather posed to him as a child. One example: *If I were to walk halfway from here to the end of the porch, and halfway again, and halfway again, how many steps would it take me to reach the end of the porch?* Cooper soon realized his grandfather would never arrive: “He didn’t mention the premise of convergence or getting within epsilon of the end of the porch, but the basic idea was planted in me.”

Walker says lessons from her own family, teachers, community and friends now enable her to walk through



The Power of Math Socialization

Research by Erica Walker, Professor of Mathematics Education, explores how early socialization around math concepts in and out of school can help develop interest, engagement and understanding. Walker says lessons from her own family, teachers, community members and friends now enable her to walk through urban neighborhoods and high schools and “look for the talent I know is there.”

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— Ansley Erickson

urban neighborhoods and high schools and “look for the talent I know is there.” As described in *Building Mathematics Learning Communities: Improving Outcomes in Urban High Schools* (Teachers College Press 2012), she found that talent at a New York City public high school, recruiting students who were already the go-to math explainers to tutor peers after school.

“Initially, they taught fellow students as they themselves had been taught — ‘you do it like this,’ ‘you write this down,’” Walker says. “But then they began using vivid analogies from movies, TV, things they’d seen on the street. Their teachers asked them to share their approaches. TC students said, ‘Hey, I can use that.’ The program became an informal yet powerful mathematics teaching and learning community.”

Science education, too, can draw on the local community. In elementary schools, the subject, if even offered, is often taught by non-specialists. Felicia Moore Mensah, Professor of Science & Education and Associate Dean, is pushing back with an approach based on “getting to know kids and their interests and helping them to see science as applicable to their lives.” In a unit

on pollution, for example, fourth- and fifth-graders in East Harlem learn about air components and air quality. They study emissions from combustible by-products of local manufacturing and consider the impact on their own families. And they discuss “environmental racism” in poor neighborhoods where childhood asthma rates are frighteningly high.

“If we don’t get young children excited about science, how can we expect them to take college courses and aspire to careers in the field?” Mensah says. “But we also have to change how science is presented to them.”

Reaching younger students makes sense. But how to connect with teens?

One answer is hip-hop education — seen as an oxymoron by some because of gangsta rap’s crude and sometimes misogynistic language. Emdin — who earlier in his career wowed Bronx ninth graders by illustrating the principles of kinetic and potential energy through the pendulum swings of a rapper’s medallion, and has since published the bestseller *For White Folks Who Teach in the ‘Hood...and the Rest of Y’all, Too* — is uninterested in smoothing over the medium’s rough edges. “I want

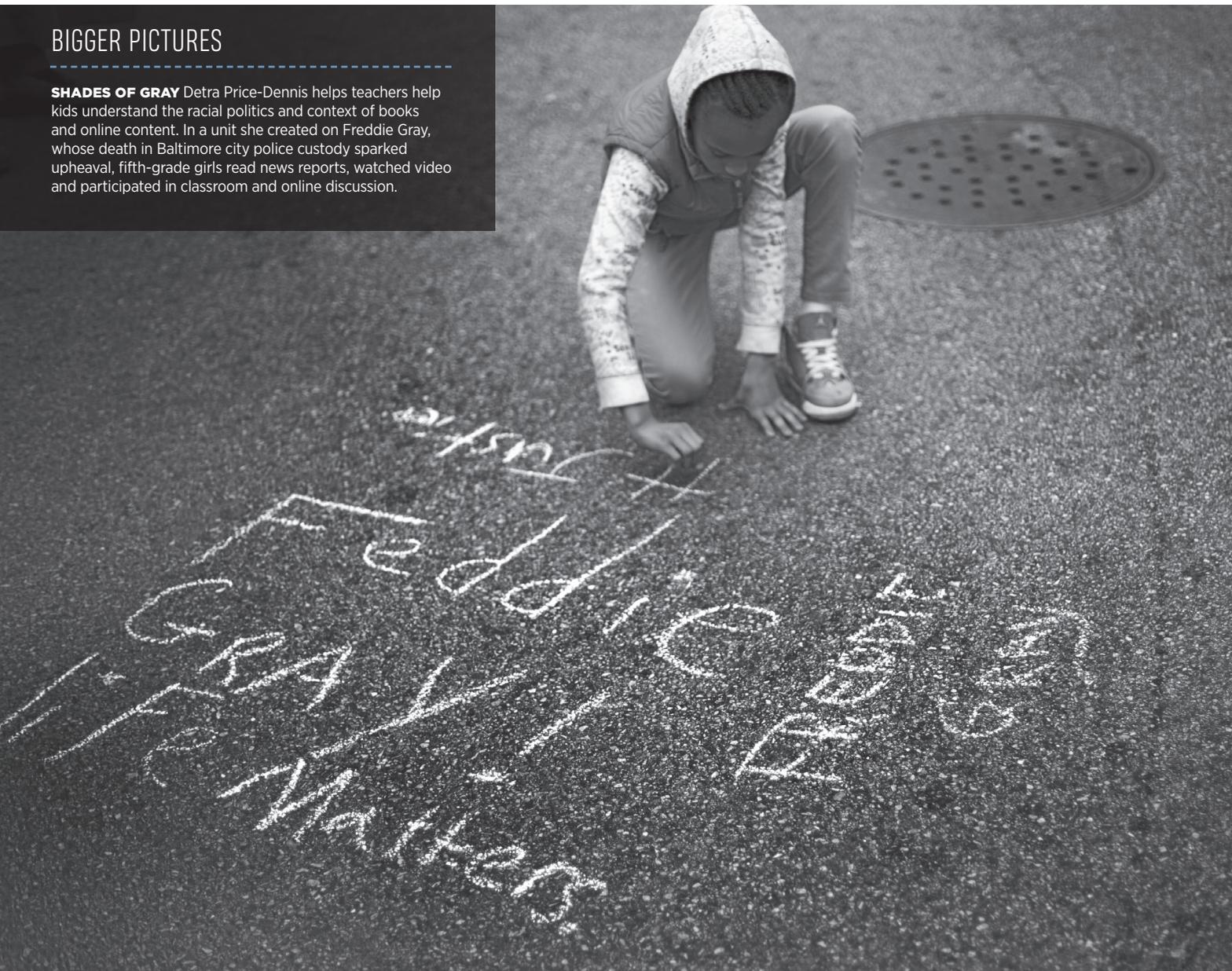


Promoting College: It Takes a School

In many predominantly black and Latino schools, a single college counselor serves hundreds of students. TC’s Michelle Knight-Manuel helped 40 New York City public schools establish “culturally relevant, college-going cultures that reflect the cultural knowledge, background and interests of their students.” Everyone in these schools, from teachers to security staff, now shares accountability for getting students to think about college.

BIGGER PICTURES

SHADES OF GRAY Detra Price-Dennis helps teachers help kids understand the racial politics and context of books and online content. In a unit she created on Freddie Gray, whose death in Baltimore city police custody sparked upheaval, fifth-grade girls read news reports, watched video and participated in classroom and online discussion.



to take what's seen as most negative about hip hop and make it the anchor of pedagogy," he says. "I want the sticker on rap albums, which is why everyone ran from hip hop, to be why folks gravitate back to it as a mechanism for reengagement in education. The image has to *look* the most problematic because the system already *is* the most problematic."

Maybe white teachers can't authentically spit cyphers and code-switch to street English, but they can import intermediaries.

"We have ambassadors for Science Genius — dudes who dropped out and know all the kids because they hang on the street," Emdin says. "We say, 'Wanna be our

community liaison?' and they're like, 'What? Nah.' We're like, 'Yo, we'll print you a business card.' Which changes their whole relationship to school. They hate school 'cause they had trauma there, too."



Not surprisingly, young people who don't connect with school are less likely to attend college. While more than 70 percent of New York City high school students graduate, rates for young black and Latino men are nearly 20 percent lower — and the City University of



RELEVANT SCIENCE

CLOSE TO HOME Felicia Moore Mensah (*far right*, with science teacher Jenny Shen, *center*, and sixth-grader Trinity Faulkner, at the Teachers College Community School) advocates teaching science by “helping kids to see science as applicable to their lives.” In one unit, students in East Harlem study local manufacturing emissions and the impact on their families.

New York considers only 14 percent of Latino men and 12 percent of black men college-ready. These students face “lowered expectations and inequitable access to high-quality learning opportunities,” says Michelle Knight-Manuel.

Recently Knight-Manuel assisted educators across 40 New York City public schools with many students of color in establishing “culturally relevant, college-going cultures that reflect the cultural knowledge, back-

ground and interests of their students.”

Every adult in these schools now shares accountability for getting students to think about college: “Typically in black and Latino schools, there’s just one counselor serving anywhere from 400 to 700 students. Our professional development sessions are for everyone, from teachers to secretaries to security people.”

Knight-Manuel’s secondary schools now get students thinking about college as early as possible:

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AND ASPIRE TO CAREERS?”

— Felicia Moore Mensah

“Sixth-graders should go on college visits. Because how can you enable kids who’ve never been to a college campus to feel that they belong?”

Older students are urged to assess whether colleges will support their success: “Ask how many students of color graduated, not just how many were accepted. And ask about the curriculum and the extra-curricular activities. Students of color at more than 80 college campuses have protested for more relevant courses.”

Above all, Knight-Manuel calls on teachers to reexamine their expectations for students of color.

“It’s about shifting perspectives to see students of color as college-bound or college-ready — because if you don’t, you’re not going to support them. One teacher

recalled a young man whom he said would be a great lawyer. He playfully called this student ‘esquire’ but never said, ‘Here’s what to think about if you want to go to law school.’ That’s what taking accountability really entails.”



AND THEN THERE'S LOVE

Academic prose can be technical and dispassionate — but not “Daring to Care,” a 2014 article about mentoring black and Latino male high school students by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz and two then-doctoral students Wanda Watson (Ed.D. ’15), now Assistant Professor of Elementary Education at Mills College in Oakland, California, and Iesha Jackson (Ed.D. ’15), now Assistant Professor of Teaching & Learning at University of Nevada, Las Vegas, College of Education.

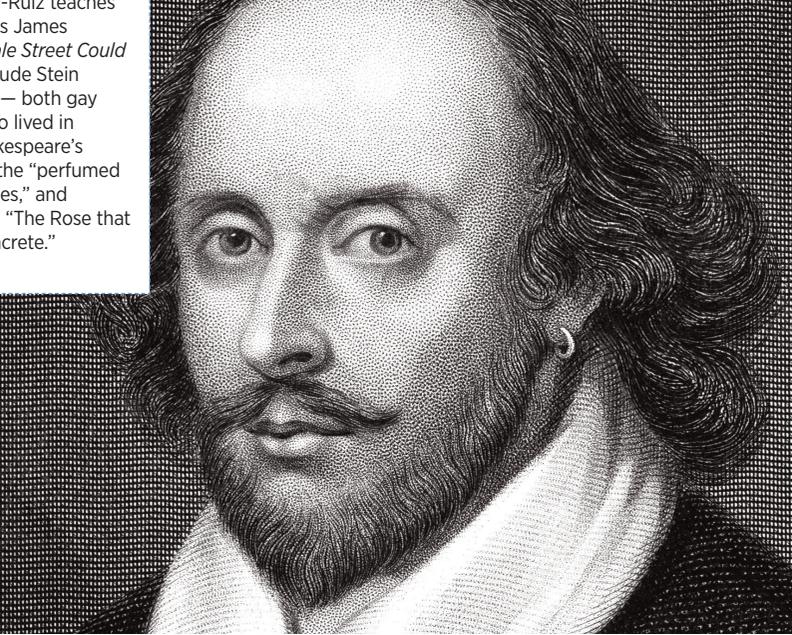
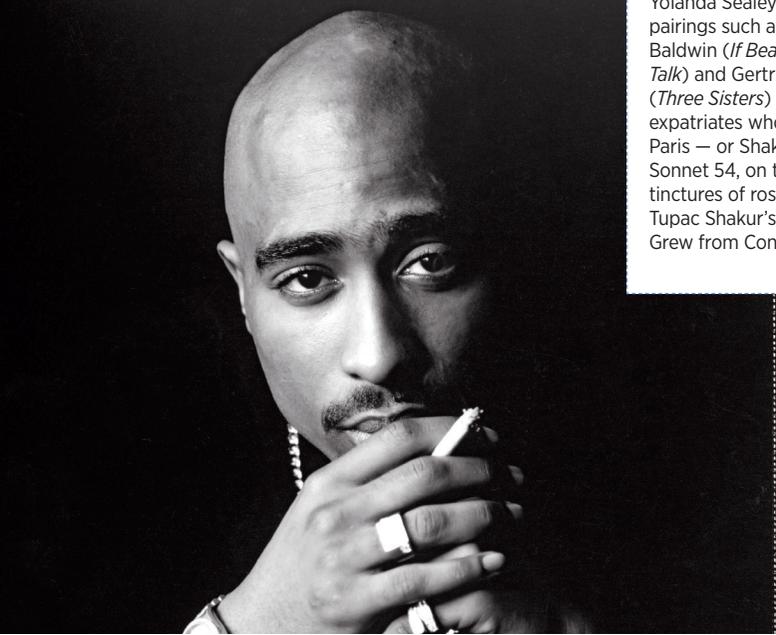
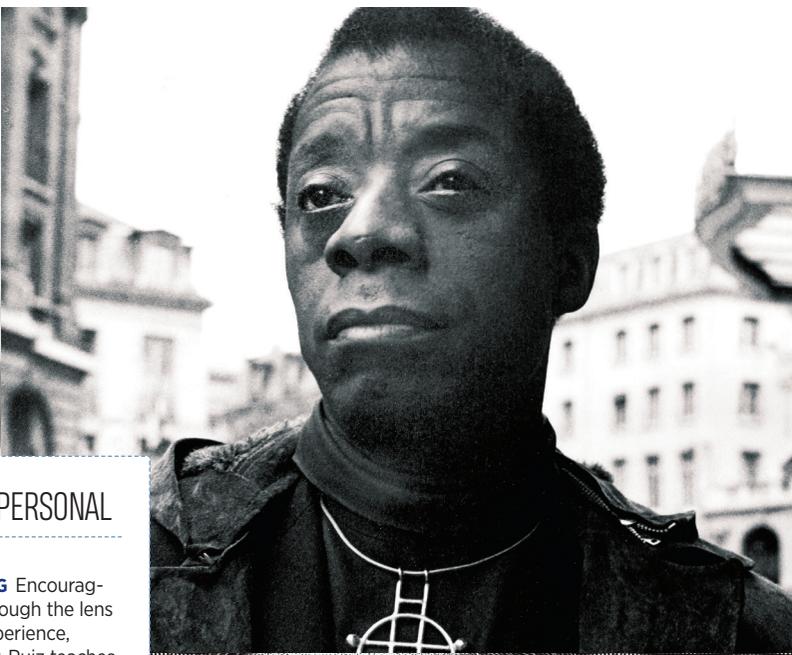
A foster mother in addition to raising her own daughter, Sealey-Ruiz, Associate Professor of English Education, has co-taught a TC course with Lalitha Vasudevan, Professor of Technology & Education, their doctoral students, and a foster care family court liaison in which students mentored teens in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. With Vasudevan and Laura Smith, Associate Professor of Psychology & Education, she leads TC’s Civic Participation Project, which addresses social justice issues.

The common thread: “inviting the lives of my students into the classroom.” Sealey-Ruiz encourages teachers and students alike to read through the lens of



Creating Community in the Classroom

In a paper called “Daring to Care,” Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz calls for setting high expectations and providing empathy and support to elicit hard work from students who don’t see themselves as deep thinkers and writers. Yet she also questions the traditional unidirectional model of supportive teaching, spotlighting “an often overlooked aspect of care — the kind that students do for each other.”



MAKING IT PERSONAL

CLOSE READING Encouraging reading through the lens of personal experience, Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz teaches pairings such as James Baldwin (*If Beale Street Could Talk*) and Gertrude Stein (*Three Sisters*) — both gay expatriates who lived in Paris — or Shakespeare’s Sonnet 54, on the “perfumed tinctures of roses,” and Tupac Shakur’s “The Rose that Grew from Concrete.”

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“If students see themselves in a book, they engage very differently,” she says.

To see themselves they have to know themselves — so Sealey-Ruiz’s students write personal essays. “I’ve had TC students come out about their sexuality in class,”

she says. Several years ago, she used the same approach in a mentoring program for “over-aged, under-credited” black and Latino male high school students.

Such work requires love — and “Daring to Care” calls for setting high expectations and then providing empathy and support to elicit hard work from students who don’t see themselves as deep thinkers and writers. Noting that the young men supported each other in considering college or dealing with police stop-and-frisks, the authors highlight “an often overlooked aspect of care — the kind that students do for each other.”

“I BELIEVE IN INVITING THE LIVES OF MY STUDENTS INTO THE CLASSROOM. IF STUDENTS SEE THEMSELVES IN A BOOK, THEY ENGAGE VERY DIFFERENTLY.”

— Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz

REDEFINING THE STAKES

Can reimagining education inspire all students, particularly those of color, to reconnect with school, work to their potential, go to college and get good jobs?

Yes, believes Amy Stuart Wells, but “only if other schools of education join TC in helping educators reimagine education” to create a broader understanding of ability, potential and what constitutes valid experience, knowledge and behavior.

For Chris Emdin, that dictum must include trusting young people to discover and embrace who they are. Emdin recalls visiting a gated private school that was using his teaching framework. Sure enough, the students, most of whom were white, sat on bean-bag chairs, scripting science dialogues and rap songs. What really struck Emdin, though, was the sight of one kid running through the halls, unattended, to answer nature’s call.

“When did you last see a kid in public school without a pass to shame him for going to the bathroom? These parents were paying for their kids to be free — to learn to structure a cypher when black and brown kids have been cyphering since they were four, but we’re not OK with allowing them to be loud. We rob them of their freedom because we’re scared. And if you’re scared of letting someone be free, then you can’t teach them.” 

— SIDDHARTHA MITTER, PATRICIA LAMIELL AND HARRIET JACKSON
CONTRIBUTED TO THIS STORY

PHOTOGRAPH: BRUCE GILBERT

REIMAGINING EDUCATION, ONLINE

Support from the Rauch Foundation

The Rauch Foundation has given Teachers College a \$25,000 grant to develop curriculum for a new online advanced certificate program in racially inclusive education that will begin and end with the Reimagining Education Summer Institute. TC Trustee Nancy Rauch Douzinas heads the Rauch Foundation, a Long Island-based family foundation that supports systemic change in communities. Through the envisioned 12-credit online program, educators would attend the Reimagining summer institute, take two 3-credit online courses over 12 months, complete culminating projects based on their



PROVIDING A FOUNDATION

The Rauch Foundation (headed by TC Trustee Nancy Rauch Douzinas, *left*) is supporting curriculum development for an advanced certificate “Reimagining” program. The foundation has funded past research by “Reimagining” director Amy Stuart Wells (*right*).

Rauch Foundation grant. The Rauch Foundation previously funded Wells’ research on segregation and inequality in Nassau County public schools. “Nancy Douzinas stands up for issues of social justice and equity in education,” Wells says. “We are so grateful for her integrity, leadership and support.”

Visit <http://bit.ly/2oisnKF> to register for the 2018 Reimagining Education Summer Institute and to watch video highlights from this past summer’s Institute.

BLUE-SKY THINKING

LOFTY PURPOSE The multi-colored paper airplane in flight was chosen as the logo for the Teachers College “Reimagining Education” initiative, symbolizing diversity and the creativity that launches fresh thinking and new ideas.