

THE POLITICS OF LIFE AND DEATH IN THE SCHOOLING OF BLACK YOUTH

By **Ebony Rose**

“The empire kills its targets through police brutality, mass incarceration, segregated and substandard schools, housing and health facilities, astronomical mortality rates to name but a few.” – Frank Wilderson III

As an activist scholar, this themed edition of the *Black History Bulletin* focused on the “crisis in Black education” is deeply personal to me. My early and late childhood experiences in a home with a mother who was addicted to drugs and a father who was absent inform how I write and think about Black life and death. Therefore, this article will be an examination of schooling for Black youth from low-income families—an intersection between academic scholarship and an autobiographical account.

Moreover, I highlight four critical aggressions that contribute to the crisis in Black education: (1) micro interactions between teacher and student within the broader context of macro relationships; (2) reproduction of oppressive systems resulting from anti-Black racist methodology; (3) extermination of the *Black* subject while maintaining the body for capitalistic exploitation; and (4) securitizing schools and criminalizing Black youth. I surmise that the dialectical nature of schooling exposes Black youth to life and death, and the current dialectical nature must be understood as one of the first steps to address the ongoing crisis.

Micro Interaction and Macro Relationships

The first critical aggression that contributes to the crisis in Black education is the micro interactions between the student and the teacher within the context of macro relationships of power. If we are to understand the logic that guide and shape the micro interactions and macro relationships, we must recognize practices that dehumanize Black youth as an aberration or an outlier in our otherwise healthy system. I argue that the disproportionality of Black students’ exposure to *social death* and the *politics of death* as defined by Orlando Patterson in his book *Slavery and Social Death*¹ is a form of “anti-life” that began in slavery. Patterson notes that this is “one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave,”² and coexists with its contradictions, *social life* and the *politics of life*. The killing of Black bodies and spirits is an actual program, practiced by our culture, that results in the ending of their physical life. This *social death* and *social life* is what structures the micro interactions between Black students and their teachers that are situated within the overall society.

Reproduction of Oppressive Systems

The second critical aggression that contributes to the crisis in Black education is that our educational system is designed to reproduce the unequal and oppressive society guided and operated in the behaviors of a state embedded in a anti-Black racist methodology.³ With this being the case, Tyson E. Lewis coins *necroschooling* to describe a form “of education that is more concerned with abandonment than with social investment, protection, etc.”⁴ In addition to *necroschooling*, he terms *necropedagogy* as a pedagogical ideology for Black and Brown students as they are constructed: “a racialized other as deficit is not simply a body that is abnormal (and thus capable of normalization) but a discounted body exposed

to necropower as a power over whose life can and cannot be educated.”⁵ As a consequence, the practice of pushing students out or repeatedly suspending Black students from school leads to the *social death* of those who are no longer part of the pedagogical life of the school and society. This is because our society sees it as a positive to no longer spend “scarce” resources on students from low-income families.

Capitalistic Exploitation

The third critical aggression that contributes to the crisis in Black education is the continued exploitation of Black bodies through capitalism. The most popular scholarship published currently neglects the methods and technologies schools engage in to exterminate the Black *subject* while maintaining the body for continued exploration, plunder, dispossession, and accumulation. Not only does this erasure ensure the survival of capitalism, but also, its more important quest is to secure the prolongation, persistence, and continuation of a White supremacist racial domination hegemonic project.⁶ A racial project utilizes consent and domination to meet the requirements of profit and the maximization of production through the plunder of Black bodies, or, simply put, the collaboration between the state and micro practices of life and death. For example, schools eradicate Black existence by conditioning Black students from low-income families for low-wage labor or prison.⁷ Black children live in a racialized capitalist society that abandons them en masse, as their Blackness is what disqualifies them from both “citizenship and the category of human,”⁸ or, as Fanon argues, the “double negation” of the ontological impossibility for Black civil existence within the paradigm of civil society.⁹ These racialized Black bodies are ejected from the active life of the citizen subject—a body that ironically is forced to survive as a social corpse, neither inside nor outside our democratic society. Therefore, ejection of Black bodies from schooling allows them to be stored in surplus to be used later for prison labor, low-wage menial labor work, or as soldiers in the military-industrial complex.¹⁰

Criminalization of Black Youth

The fourth and final critical aggression that contributes to the crisis in Black education is the securitizing of schools and the criminalization of Black youth. The Nixon presidency was the beginning of the era of racially targeted “law and order” policies that racially skewed mass imprisonment.¹¹ In the reigning public image of the criminal, young African American men from the inner city became *Black monsters*. Moreover, Black men have come to personify the explosive mix of moral degeneracy and mayhem.¹² In addition, Black males are represented in our society as criminal and “at risk” academically; this occurs through media representations by journalists and Hollywood portrayals of inner-city Black youth as culturally different or deficient.¹³ Schools serve as sites for the reproduction of these negative racial representations of Black children through the practices of some teachers and administrators.¹⁴ One factor in the treatment of inner-city youth who are poor as prison inmates hinges on the proposition that their teachers see these students as unsalvageable.¹⁵ Implicit in this mode of thinking are two recognizable structural realities that both administrators and teachers are consciously aware of: (1) that prison looms over the future of Black youth who fail in school, and (2) that schools have to sacrifice students who are troublesome to teach those who are more deserving or promising because of the lack of resources.¹⁶

Conclusion

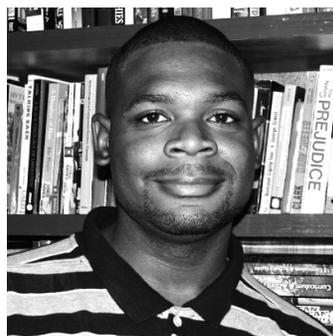
In this article, I provided an exploratory analysis of the four critical aggressions that contribute to the crisis in Black education: (1) micro interactions between teacher and student within the broader context of macro relationships; (2) reproduction of oppressive systems resulting from anti-Black racist methodology; (3) extermination of the *Black* subject while maintaining the body for capitalistic exploitation; and (4) securitizing schools and criminalizing Black youth. I think our long-term strategy and struggle to end racism, anti-Black violence, capitalist exploitation, and White supremacy (the macro) should be simultaneously

supplemented with actions that prolong and cultivate Black life. This includes defining who we are and where we want to be, and loving ourselves and our lives in a world where no one else does (the micro). This is difficult, but not impossible. Teaching this to our youth outside of formal education is a first step. This radical act of unconditional Black love will rejuvenate past struggles and continue the fight for the right to exist, which in itself is a subversive and emancipatory measure in an *anti-Black* universe. I believe this is *one* way we can combat the critical aggressions I discussed earlier.

Notes:

1. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
2. Ibid., 8.
3. Ebony Rose, “Deathscapes in Neoliberal Times: Prisonfare, Workfare and Resistance as Potential Outcomes for Black Youth” (master’s thesis, DePaul University, 2015), http://via.library.depaul.edu/soe_etd/78.
4. Tyson E. Lewis, “Understanding the Logic of Educational Encampment: From Illich to Agamben,” *International Journal of Illich Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 34.
5. Ibid.
6. Howard Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
7. Rose.
8. Jamie Amparo Alves, “From Necropolis to Blackpolis: Necropolitical Governance and Black Spatial Praxis in São Paulo, Brazil,” *Antipode* 46, no. 2 (2014): 323–39.
9. Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

10. Deborah Cowen and Amy Siciliano, “Surplus Masculinities and Security,” *Antipode* 43, no. 5 (2011): 1516–41.
11. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012).
12. Loic Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh,” *Punishment and Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 95–134.
13. Ann Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.



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LESSON PLAN:

CREATING A CULTURE OF PEACE IN OUR COMMUNITIES AND SCHOOLSBy: **Ebony Rose****Connections to High School**

Throughout the United States, high school students are organizing and fighting for better schools, social justice, and human rights. These young adults are change makers who are partnering with adults, community leaders, and organizations to act upon issues that are important to them, such as mitigating the impact of microaggressions and violence.

Goals and Objectives

Students will contemplate the realities of violence, its devastating impact on communities, and the capacity of “violence interrupters” to break the cycle of violence. Students will also investigate the role gender plays in engaging communities and changing social norms around peace and violence.

Students will view the documentary *The Interrupters*—a film about an effort to stop the cycle of retaliatory violence that plagues the streets of Chicago. Former gang members and ex-convicts known as “violence interrupters” work with an organization called Ceasefire, using their street credibility to stop shootings before they happen. Ameena Matthews, former drug ring enforcer and daughter of one of Chicago’s most notorious gang leaders, uses her unique skills as a violence interrupter to identify and de-escalate a conflict before it turns to bloodshed.

This lesson will:

- Increase students’ understandings about the complex and epidemiological nature of urban violence.
- Help students to employ strategies to effectively manage conflict.
- Promote civic engagement strategies to foster understanding, change thinking and build support for both community and social change.

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards: US History Teacher Expectations

#1 Culture: Through the study of culture and cultural diversity, learners understand how human beings create, learn, share, and adapt to culture, and appreciate the role of culture in shaping their lives and society, as well the lives and societies of others. In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with geography, history, sociology, and anthropology, as well as multicultural topics across the curriculum.

#2 People, Places, and Environments: This theme helps learners to develop their spatial views and perspectives of the world, to understand where people, places, and resources are located and why they are there, and to explore the relationship between human beings and the environment. In schools, this theme typically appears in courses dealing with geography and area studies, but it is also important for the study of the geographical dimension of other social studies subjects.

#3 Individual Development and Identity: Personal identity is shaped by family, peers, culture, and institutional influences. Through this theme, students examine the factors that influence an individual’s personal identity, development, and actions.

#4 Individuals, Groups, and Institutions: Institutions such as families and civic, educational, governmental, and religious organizations exert a major influence on people’s lives. This theme allows students to understand how institutions are formed, maintained, and changed, and to examine their influence.

#5 Power, Authority, and Governance: One essential component of education for citizenship is an understanding of the historical development and contemporary forms of power, authority, and governance. Through this theme,

learners become familiar with the purposes and functions of government, the scope and limits of authority, and the differences between democratic and nondemocratic political systems.

#6 Civic Ideals and Practices: An understanding of civic ideals and practices is critical to full participation in society and is an essential component of education for citizenship. This theme enables students to learn about the rights and responsibilities of citizens of a democracy, and to appreciate the importance of active citizenship.

Warm-Up

1. Explain to students that unfortunately, violence is a part of our daily lives. We see it on TV and portrayed in movies and video games. We hear about it in popular music. Share statistics—the US has the highest youth homicide rate among the world’s twenty-five wealthiest nations, and violence is the second leading cause of death among young people ages fifteen to nineteen.
2. Write the term *Violence* on the board and have students brainstorm how they would define violence in their own words. Record their responses
3. Divide the students into small groups of three to five. Assign the questions listed below to each group.
 - Where have you witnessed violence?
 - Why do you think there is so much violence in our society?
 - Why do you think violence is the second leading cause of death among young people ages fifteen to nineteen?
 - How has violence affected your life?
4. Read aloud the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) definition of violence:

“The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person or against a group or community that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002).

Check for student understanding of the CDC’s definition by asking them to rewrite it in their own words. Ask students to share their definitions.

Ask students if they are surprised to hear that the CDC approaches violence as a public health issue that can be addressed in a similar manner to other injuries or health problems. Why or why not? Ask students to describe the similarities violence might have to an infectious disease.

Inform students that they are going to watch two modules that feature the work of Ceasefire employee and “violence interrupter,” Ameena Matthews. Explain that as a former gang member and daughter of a famous gang leader, Ameena has skills and street credibility that allow her to successfully interrupt potentially volatile conflicts on the streets. Let students know that community mobilization is a key component of Ameena’s strategy, which includes street outreach, mentorship, and drawing upon her ties in the community.

Activity

You will need:

Film module: *The Interrupters: Collective Responsibility* [8:39]

Student Handout A: Film Module Worksheet

Film module: *The Interrupters: Ameena & Caprysha* [9:42]

- Distribute *Student Handout A: Film Module Worksheet* and review together before viewing the modules.
- Instruct students to fill in their graphic organizer while viewing a module introducing Ameena’s background and highlighting her work in the streets. Tell students to keep the worksheet for reference during the post-screening discussion.
- Optional: Provide additional context by screening the trailer, which can be found at interrupters.kartemquin.com/trailer. To acquire the full-length version of the module, visit: interrupters.kartemquin.com.
- Begin post-screening discussion by asking for volunteers to share their notes on *Student Handout A: Film Module Worksheet*.

Use the following prompts to guide the class discussion:

- How does Ameena’s personal experience give her access to the streets of Chicago?
- Describe Ameena’s personality traits. How do they help her interrupt violence?
- What connections does Ameena have in the community? How do those connections help her identify potentially violent situations?
- What skills does Ameena use to capture the attention of the young people she works with? How does she gain their trust?
- Whom does Ameena hold accountable for street violence? What does she ask community

members to do?

- In the first module, Ameena is referred to as the “golden girl” who can get in where male violence interrupters can’t get in—why is this? How might Ameena’s gender be an asset when attempting to interrupt a violent situation? How might it hinder her?
- Is peace feminine? Is street and gang violence masculine?
- Does Ameena use different tactics to interrupt violence than men might use? If so, why might this be the case?
- What are the advantages of recruiting former gang members, like Ameena, to prevent violence? What are the disadvantages?
- How is the job of an interrupter different than the job of a social worker or a police officer?

Assessment Essay

As stated in the pre-screening discussion, “violence is a part of our daily lives.” Based on what you have learned, what qualities do you possess that would help you contribute as a violence interrupter in your own community? How is your community affected by violence? How are women, specifically, affected by violence? What actions would you choose to take as a violence interrupter? Whom would you work with? What outcome(s) would you hope to achieve?

Teacher Resources

- *The Interrupters* Educators’ Guide: <http://cdn.itvs.org/interrupters-educator-guide.pdf>
- Film module: *The Interrupters: Collective Responsibility* [8:39]
- Film module: *The Interrupters: Ameena & Caprysha* [9:42]
- *Teacher Handout: Activist Spotlight Rubric*
- *Student Handout A: Film Module Worksheet*
- *Student Handout B: Activist Spotlight*