



Unapologetically Brilliant, Black Children!

by Author and Literacy Consultant

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That Black children are brilliant should not be considered conjecture, an opinion for which no proof has yet to be found. That Black children are brilliant should be considered "an axiom...a self-evident starting point for deducing and inferring other truths," argue Maisei Gholson, Erika Bullock, and Nathan Alexander, editorial authors of [*On the Brilliance of Black Children: A Response to a Clarion Call*](#), which appeared in the July 2012 *Journal of Mathematics (JUME)*.

“We cannot tolerate or support ideologies and practices that cripple our children further - those that hold that our children are the problem or those that assume that our teachers and school leaders are not capable of becoming powerful factors in the lives of students," says the late [Dr. Asa G. Hilliard, also known as Nana Baffour Amankwatia II](#), in his essay *No Mystery: Closing the Achievement Gap*, featured in the 2003 book [*Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students*](#).

And yet, as University of California Professor Tyrone C. Howard tells us in his 2013 article, "[*How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Black Male Students, Schools, and Learning in Enhancing the Knowledge Base to Disrupt Deficit Frameworks*](#)," the struggle to have Black children seen as brilliant, beautiful, capable human beings is real. “The data continues to paint a deeply disturbing picture of how Black children are “seen as a problem” (Howard, 2013) in many U.S. schools. According to data from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services & the U.S. Department of Education (2014), Black students made up only 18 percent of students in public schools in 2012-2013 but were 40 percent of students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions. While Black children make up approximately 18 % of all students in schools, they make up 32 percent of children arrested and 40 percent of all children and youth in residential placement in the juvenile justice system.”

Which is why we need to amplify the work of Black Brilliance scholars. The education of Black children is in a state of emergency. The authors of *On the Brilliance of Black Children* tell us that in stating their proposition that they want to continually pose the following questions: “What do I really believe about Black children and their abilities? How does my work reflect those beliefs? and, Given that Black children are brilliant, how does this affect my research agenda?”

CAN WE DEFINE BRILLIANCE?

These questions alone could transform American education in a heartbeat and bring about the revolution that many have sought for centuries. To bring about this revolution, though, it's appropriate to explore definitions of brilliance put forth by those committed to beholding it in Black children.

[Cultural Historian, Singer, Storyteller, and Educator Dr. Karen Wilson Ama-Echefu](#) defines brilliance as "the quality of the engagement, the omnipresence of creativity – it's going on all the time, if we're paying attention, their strength of resolve, the richness and rhythm of language, the ability to manipulate themselves or other things in space, building or drawing, communication through evocative movement – we can say more with a finger than people can express on a page, a hand on a hip says volumes. We come from a tradition that demonstrates that movement as language and it comes across cultures." These are intellectual qualities, of course, that aren't measured on high-stakes standardized tests.

Wilson-Ama'Echefu adds, "I also look for how do you, the child, make a way out of no way, for how many tools can you bring to bear so that you can respond to your need?"

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Former Georgia State University Professor Hilliard in *Young, Gifted, and Black* says brilliance is excellence. It's not relative, as in Black children compared to white children. "It's based upon criterion levels of performance," he says. For instance, he cited the Project SEED schools, where Black fifth graders learn calculus, and where, in addition to "significant gains on arithmetic achievement and mathematics achievement," researchers have also found "enormous gains in academic self-concept and self-esteem, and improvement in communication and social skills."

COMPETITION BREEDS BRILLIANCE

He also referenced the competitive world of mock trials, [featured in a 1999 New York Times article](#). "In this intellectual sport, traditionally dominated by elite schools, where participants take the roles of attorneys in arguing cases based in real law, schools with poor academic achievement have consistently risen through the championship ranks...Carver High School, from North Philadelphia's notorious Badlands, won the city championship and defeated dozens of prep and private schools to finish second in the state finals...John C. Shipley, coach of a national championship team and Mock Trial handbook author, said of the trend: "Schools you never heard of in the past, except for maybe gang problems or poor academics, are suddenly taking the competitions by storm."

Reminiscent of the movie *The Great Debaters*, which was based on Thurgood Marshall's teaching career, and starred Denzel Washington, Hilliard notes, the so-called poor, low-achieving kids "changed the game, picking up the pace, bringing a more aggressive cultural style, performing even more complicated intellectual feats than ever before..."

This is an example of what Wilson-Ama'Echefu describes as "bringing the tools you have to bear so that you can respond to what you need." The Black children abided by the rules of the debate but brought cultural experiences and intellectual tools, such as fast and furious street-smart wit and language, so that those who attached themselves to the traditional system were completely outdone.

BRILLIANCE PUSHES EDUCATORS

[LaQuisha Hall, the 2018 Baltimore City Teacher of the Year](#), Instructional Coach to Teacher Leaders, and veteran middle school and high school literacy instructor, says the brilliance of Black children pushed her to be a better educator. “I felt empowered to go above and beyond as an educator because of the brilliance my students brought into my space. When I sat in trainings, and looked through old dusty textbooks, I knew I had to step my game up to meet them where they were.”

Where they were, she says, was willing to challenge her on how to make lessons relevant. Students routinely would come to her with ideas for how to drive a lesson home. One male student asked to do it with a poem. She also found that her students were willing to author essays for anthologies she helped them launch through book signings and sell through self-publishing on Amazon. She’s received national attention for her [pioneering literacy teaching efforts, including in The Atlantic](#). But her greatest joys are inspiring children like Jared (not his real name) who stuttered, to take her high school English honors, which led him to blossom as a poet and spoken word artist and win a city-wide competition, and Sean (not his real name), a Special Education student, to open up and become one of her published authors.

“I believe that Black children are the most creative that I’ve ever met. That creativity extends beyond art, rap, and dance. Just the way they interpreted literature was creative. The connections they made through their lives was creative. If you come at them with scripted curriculum saying, “You gotta pass this test, that test, then you have scrapped all opportunities for them to be creative in your classroom.”

BRILLIANCE AS DYNAMIC INTELLIGENCE

Around the globe, brilliance is understood as dynamic, unbossed, unbottled and capable of emerging in ways that defy standardization.

“We need to radically rethink our definition of intelligence,” says the late Sir Ken Robinson, of Great Britain. Robinson was an international author, speaker, and advisor on education in the arts. In a popular [2014 TedTalk, Are Schools Killing Creativity?](#), which has received more than 20 million views, he continues, “One, it’s diverse – we think visually, in sound, kinesthetically, in abstract terms, and in movement. Intelligence is dynamic, wonderfully interactive. Third thing is, it’s distinct.”



In a follow-up [TedTalk, *Bring on the Learning Revolution*](#), Robinson offered more on the cure. “We need to go from an industrial model based on linearity, and conformity, and batching people. We have to move to a model based on agriculture. Human flourishing is not a mechanical process, it’s an organic process and you cannot predict the outcome of human development. All you can do is, like a farmer, create the conditions under which they will begin to flourish.”

Those conditions have been a feature in African societies for millennia and in African American communities since Africans were brought to these shores as chattel. 20th and 21st century scholars such as Carter G. Woodson, Early Childhood Educator Janice Hale, and Education Professors Chris Edmin, Gholdy Muhammad, [Jarvis R. Givens](#), along with Hilliard, are some of the most prominent Black thinkers on Black Brilliance and how to help unleash it.

CREATIVITY, CONFIDENCE & CONCERNS

Woodson’s work grew out of the anti-Black racism of post-bellum school curricula. “The knowledge system of schools constructed Black people as ahistorical subjects, obscured historical systems of oppression, and taught students to look to White-Eurocentric colonial ideology as a human standard,” Givens quotes Woodson as saying in his 2019 *American Educational Research Journal* article *There Would Be No Lynching If It Did Not Start in the Schoolroom*.

Black educators vigorously supported Woodson’s efforts to shift the educational paradigm, Givens reported in the 2019 piece: “Woodson and African American teachers strived to reimagine the experience of Black schooling altogether in their staging of Negro History Weeks...This was an enterprise in reimagining the very ecological context of, and for, Black learning...It was fundamentally concerned with Black embodiment, meaning the existential experience of African American learners.”

The late [Hale’s work with pre-school children and educators](#) emerged in the 1980s and was documented in her book, *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles*. Features of her curriculum model include: “High affective support, self-concept development (children’s confidence will be developed through frequent compliments, praise, display of work, performances, open houses, and frequent success experiences), creative expression, arts and crafts, activities, African culture, Afro-American culture, extra-curricular activities, and holidays. For instance, ‘if Thanksgiving is taught, it will not be a celebration of the point of view of the pilgrims.’ ”

Edmin, an associate professor of Mathematics, Science, and Technology at Teacher’s College, Columbia University, draws packed houses [at teacher conferences and strong views for his TedTalks](#). In his 2017 bestselling book, [For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood,](#) he names his approach to Black brilliance Reality Pedagogy. “Reality pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf. It focuses on making the local experiences of the student visible and creating contexts where there is a role reversal of sorts that positions the student as the expert in his or her own teaching and learning, and the teacher as the learner... Reality pedagogy allows for youth to reveal how and where teaching and learning practices have wounded them. .. Instead of seeing students as equal to their cultural identity, a reality pedagogy sees students as individuals who are influenced by their cultural identity.”

[Dr. Gholdy Muhammad](#) is also a recent thought leader on Black Brilliance. Her popular 2020 book, [“Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework,”](#) speaks to four components for nurturing literacy potential. Two among them are criticality and identity development. “Criticality helps teachers understand and explain inequities in education and is a step toward teaching anti-oppression...Teaching criticality humanizes instruction and makes it more compassionate....Our students, and arguably adults, are always looking for themselves in spaces and places. ...(Students) are seeking to find curriculum and instructional practices that honor the multiple aspects of who they are. Who we are is connected to historical, institutional, and political and sociocultural factors.”

Baltimore Teacher Coach Hall agrees. When her district required students to read four novels a year, she brought in works outside the curriculum. The result was that most of her students read as many as 10 books. And they encouraged one another. Having confidence in their own brilliance after months of having their teacher reflect it back to them, she noted, “They pulled it out of each other.”



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