

## Reimagining Education: Restore, Rebuild, Curate, Uplift, and Celebrate

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*In this paper, a principal and two lead teachers describe the ways their school community has reimagined the learning environment at their NYC urban, public, K-5 elementary school throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020 they were forced to immediately switch to fully remote learning, a platform they had never previously experienced. Since then, they have engaged in hybrid and now fully in person learning through a worldwide pandemic. The school community, whose focus before the pandemic was on social emotional learning and culturally responsive pedagogy, utilized those practices and the strong relationships between staff, students, and families to persevere. The pandemic disproportionately impacted communities of color, like the one this school community is located in. Other inequalities such as food insecurity, job loss, sickness, financial strain, and death impacted the community. Racial trauma and political unrest that was exacerbated during the pandemic also placed a toll on the school community. The staff, families and children of the community joined together with a mission to support one another, strengthen relationships, practice self-care, address trauma and crisis, tackle unfinished learning, and focus on celebrating the community wherever possible to find joy, survive and thrive.*

### **Introduction**

In this essay we examine, as leaders and educators of a small urban, Harlem, NYC elementary school, our collective approach to reimagining the learning experience we provide for our school family. Operating currently in year 3 of pandemic schooling that started with fully remote learning year 1, hybrid remote and in person instruction year 2 and fully in person learning this school year, our approach is in a constant state of evolution. The COVID-19 pandemic shed a harsh light on the disparities that exist for many students across the nation, specifically in the community we serve. In Harlem, as in other similar communities across the nations, the long-term effects of sickness, loss of income, anxiety, trauma, stress, death rates, grief, depression, and racial unrest, have impacted communities of color in disproportionate ways (McPhearson, Grabowski, Herreros-Cantis, Mustafa, Ortiz, Kennedy, Tomateo, Lopez, Olivotto & Vantu, 2020). City and state education leaders increasingly encourage and promote trauma-informed practices that support the social-emotional development of students and families. During this 3<sup>rd</sup> year of pandemic schooling, while educators are experiencing the effects of their own burnout and fatigue, we are experiencing the need to not only address the unfinished

learning our students have experienced but also the need for social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing supports, not only for the students but for the adults who care for them inside and outside of school. Through a collective and collaborative process that included surveys, virtual town hall discussions, PTA meetings, faculty meetings and student discussions, we created an approach to learning that curated our best practices and those we researched to provide a reimagined learning experience that centers the student, and resulted in an uplifting their cultural identities, allowing for joy and celebration and fostering relationship building while we addressed unfinished learning and a wide variety of individual academic needs.

The idea the following sections highlight what we put in place that contributed to our students' social emotional well-being and learning. There are 3 tenets we uncovered while working as a team on the ways we would support our students. We have summarized them in the following paragraphs.

### **Social Emotional Learning: Our inspiration**

In more recent years, there has been a movement towards ensuring that social emotional learning is grounded in a culturally responsive approach so as not to cause additional harm to students through the use of SEL as a method for behavior control. SEL is actually a way to encourage, not suppress effective expressions of emotions. Social emotional learning that centers culturally responsive practices allows for a deeper connection with students that connects to their identities and socio-political contexts in order to teach them SEL competencies with cultural sensitivity (McCallops, Barnes, Berte, Fenniman, Jones, Navon & Nelson, 2019). Our school leader decided, in collaboration with a lead teacher, to begin addressing the well-being concerns of our students, staff and families 10 years ago through the piloting and implementation of the RULER Approach from Yale Institute for Emotional Intelligence as a schoolwide practice and expectation. Over the years we have supplemented the SEL practices with mindful practice, Yoga and an integration of SEL with our culturally responsive instructional focus and school culture. A trailblazer in social emotional learning (SEL), physician, psychiatrist, founder, and chairman of the School Development Program (SDP) at Yale University, current Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale, James Comer began his work in SEL in 1968 at Yale University. Around that time, he developed the "Comer Approach" which placed the collaboration of students, families, teachers, and administrators at the center in advancing the outcomes for students. The approach was born out of his knowledge of child development and with the community and family at the center, his approach focused on the holistic support of the students as a basis for their learning experience. The approach, which is the foundation of much of the current SEL movement, created relationships between educators, their students, and their families in the social and emotional support of the students. Under these conditions, a sense of connection and belonging is fostered. This being the ideal environment for students to thrive academically within (Roach, 2013). Goleman (1995), defines emotional intelligence as the ability to recognize and identify emotions, recognize, and regulate emotions where necessary, ultimately resulting in an ability to express them effectively which impacts their relationships and experiences with others.

Camangian & Cariaga (2021) ask us, "Are we teaching individual students to manage their emotions and behaviors simply for the sake of upward mobility or are we teaching students to recognize and re-claim their emotions and relationships as fuel for political inquiry, radical healing, and social transformation (p. 16)?" In response to this question, we believe we are delivering to our students a life skill and an ownership over their

emotions and relationships that will allow them access to joy and success. We are providing our students a path to healing, strategies to manage life's daily stresses, and the ability to experience positive relationships and connections with one another through self-awareness, empathy and belonging.

### **Cultural Responsiveness: Our Muses**

We employ a culturally responsive approach to learning at our school that lives within all fibers of our school culture and the learning experience we provide. Over the years we have utilized the work and wisdom of the scholars and research-based practices to help build our knowledge as educators on best practices in CRSE. Our school was opened in 2005 through the vision of Dr. Calvin O. Butts III. Dr. Butts' vision was that students should experience models of excellence in leaders, artists and characters that looked like them to provide them an increased positive self-concept that would combat the negative imagery they were exposed to and instead access to success and achievement. The founding principal of our school Dr. Sean Davenport executed this vision through leaders and artists of the month of color, CRSE curriculum, poetry, and the arts. As when the school began, students still participate in daily culturally responsive rituals and routines, such as reciting Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, reciting their school creed and sharing positive affirmations. Current principal Dr. Dawn Brooks DeCosta, has continued the vision and legacy through arts partnerships, professional development for staff in culturally responsive pedagogy, continued curriculum enhancements, culturally responsive texts, and the integration of social emotional learning. She also engages a variety of community based partnerships that maximize and enhance the learning experiences for the students such as urban farming and plant based cooking with Harlem Grown, culturally responsive STEM lessons with Yvonne Thevenot's NYC STEM Kids, an expanded school day through their community based partner SoBro and arts education through The Studio Museum in Harlem and the Museum of Modern Art. Dr. DeCosta also regularly opens the doors of the school to share practices with school leaders across the globe who wish to learn about CRSE and SEL in action. She is currently supporting a cohort of schools through her Culturally Responsive Social Emotional Leadership (CRSEL) framework in collaboration with Harlem Community School District 5 and the Harlem Renaissance Education Pipeline and has led a nationwide webinar series on the same topic with one of the school's beloved partners in mindful practices and brain breaks, Pure Edge Inc. Currently, staff are regularly engaged in article and text studies around CRSE to build their repertoire. Staff and students have engaged in critical self-reflection around race and identity. Parents have also participated in culturally relevant family projects and a book study, as did the staff, of Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's *Cultivating Genius*. Dr. Muhammad's Historical Literacy Framework is what is used in literacy lesson planning. The staff are currently utilizing research to construct a culturally responsive social emotional math curriculum through a grant from the DOE Office of New School Design led by a co-author of this article Michael Cornell, the school's Math and Technology Lead and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. All classes participate in monthly culturally responsive schoolwide writing tasks, and all utilize culturally responsive texts in their classroom libraries. One of the authors of this article Danica Goyens Ward who was mentored for 2 years by Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, serves at the school's Peer Collaborative and Culturally Responsive Lead Teacher and Mentor, supporting school staff in the implementation of CRSE through a lab classroom.

Gloria Ladson-Billings, coined *culturally relevant pedagogy* based on her research study a work of teachers in the early 1990's. Using culturally relevant texts and culturally competent lesson planning approaches, Ladson-Billings explained that teachers used the

culture of the students as “a vehicle for learning” where parents and family members engaged to share their “cultural knowledge” (1995, p. 161). In her own evolution of the concept she coined, Ladson-Billings encourages us now while we exist in this pandemic, to, “pursue a new vision of what it means to educate all students” (1995, p. 170). In her *Culturally Relevant Remix 2.0*, Ladson Billings (2021) charges us to move beyond instruction that is culturally relevant but culturally sustaining and ever evolving. This remix reimagines how we can amplify student voice and encourage that they actively question the perspectives, policies and practices that directly impact their lives. Ladson-Billings (2021) encourages us to continue to “remix” the approach to effectively meet the continued evolution of student needs and experiences. Geneva Gay’s (2018) definition of culturally responsive pedagogy is “using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (p. 29). This attends to the intellectual needs of the students while also attending to the need for an identity-centered focus. Hammond (2014) went further to identify “affirmation and validation” as part of her *Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching*. She noted in the framework the need for building a “sense of self-efficacy, positive mindset, reducing social emotional stress, providing care and a push, building a socially and intellectually safe environment and using a restorative justice frame” (p. 17). The work of these scholars is even more relevant today as we work during a time of crisis. We strive to stay focused on what students need most, even more so while anxiety, stress and uncertainty have become a part of the daily experience.

### **Combating Racial Trauma: A Motivation to Empower**

Recent incidents of racial unrest as well as the pandemic, heightened the levels and our awareness of racial trauma in our students. The murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, the riots on January 6<sup>th</sup> and the repeated images that were regularly played through media during a time where staff, students and parents were home for remote learning, resulted in trauma and pain. Students were in search of answers to what they were seeing and hearing. One 5<sup>th</sup> grade student asked after a racially biased incident he experienced in a local restaurant, “Why do they hate us?” As educators and parents, we were also traumatized by the events, compounded by years of similar incidents without a sense of justice. We needed tools and strategies to discuss race in developmentally appropriate ways for our children, ways to discuss discrimination, racial violence and oppression and an outlet for our school community to process and express the emotions they were feeling and their hopes for change. We utilized resources from PBS Kids, Learning for Justice, the Morningside Center for Social Responsibility and platforms for community expression and sharing such as Flipgrid. We provided our students with the truth, with compassion and empathy while we allowed them to share their pain, their confusion and hopes as we shared ours, and this provided us with an optimism that we could be agents of change. Prior to these incidents, through our curriculum, rituals, and routines, we were already grounding our students in their identity, finding joy and connection in their heritage and knowledge of diverse cultures which provided them the positive self-concept that would shield them from some of the harm of racial trauma. This is in direct correlation with what Ladson-Billings (2021) advocates which is for educators to provide opportunities for students to question and resist the policies and practices that marginalize them. This is healing for our students, staff, and families. Liu & Modir (2020) assert that one “significant protective factor against racial trauma is cultural identity, or a positive sense of oneself as existing within and belonging to a certain culture” (p. 440). This research correlates with the students’ positive self-concept that we foster at our school and how this focus on cultural identity and sense

of belonging provides some level of protection for our students against racial trauma. Each year, all classes participate in schoolwide writing tasks, where they learn the developmentally needed writing skills for their grade levels through studying and writing about topics that infuse social justice. Two of the schoolwide 4-6 week units include one called The Future of Black Liberation where they learn about movements from African Americans and others toward the efforts to fight against injustice through activism, scholarship and the arts. Another unit is Children as Revolutionaries: Youth Activism, which engages the students in the awareness of young people utilizing their voices in social justice issues such as racism and climate change.

French, Lewis, Mosley, Adames, Chavez-Dueñas, Chen & Neville (2020) discuss “radical healing” as rooted in “identifying the ways people thrive and become whole” through “Liberation psychology” which “centers the struggle of oppressed individuals in society”. The encouraging news that informs our practice in focusing on social justice learning is that the healing process also requires “active resistance” (p. 20).

### **How Our Students Learn**

As we press forward through pandemic schooling, continued uncertainty, working within a system where extreme creativity is required to build connection and relationships through face masks, desks in rows and social distancing, combined what we are learning about how students learn best through a multifaceted approach. Understanding how to address unfinished learning, stress, anxiety, social emotional disconnections, racial and personal trauma while attempting to create an environment where students, staff and families can still experience joy is no easy feat. Linda Darling Hammond (2021) outlined in a Forbes article on accelerating learning, the key components needed to address unfinished learning which included: relationship building, allowing students to construct their own knowledge in their social emotional, socio political and cultural contexts, physical activity, joy and self-expression. Darling Hammond (2021) also emphasized the need to care for students’ self-perception of their own abilities during this delicate time where they are working to catch up and needing to feel self-esteem in that process. The need for schoolwide healing daily can be found in moments of joy and celebration. We utilize this learning from Dr. Darling Hammond by engaging our students and staff in daily guided meditation, mood check ins, affirmations, and yoga. We celebrate publicly, lessons that build connection through CRSE and SEL, staff and student achievements, artistic and innovative practices and moments of student, staff and parent agency with our school and wider community. Practices that fill voids, that are healing centered and connected to real world experiences are a key part of our approach. Through a partnership with Systemic Transformation of Inquiry Learning Environments (STILE) and Teachers’ College Columbia University, classes are engaging in real world project-based learning where they are practicing being active changemakers in their community. Students need daily learning experiences that are culturally affirming, opportunities to amplify their voices, and creative in building relationships and belonging through celebrations of identity. As a school community we center the voices of our students through identity reflection and student leadership as self-awareness leaders and student council, our teachers and support staff through leadership roles and collaborative decision-making opportunities, our administrators through professional development and collaborative systems and structures and our families through support groups, self-care tools and an open line of communication. We share our individual and collective needs, hopes, fears and dreams for the culture of care we want for our students. We created a process and approach to learning that is ever evolving and adapting to the needs of the community.

We operate as a family, working through challenges to meet everyone's needs with love and a culture of care.

The subsequent sections outline our approach as we faced schooling during a worldwide pandemic. We took the 3 tenets mentioned above, social emotional learning, cultural responsiveness and combating racial trauma through empowerment and created a series of approaches, structures, and systems at our school to meet the needs of all stakeholders in our school family while learning through a pandemic during remote, hybrid and in person learning. We have developed 3 "solutions" that we will continue to utilize post pandemic that allowed us to continue striving towards our aspired vision of excellence, care and belonging for all members of our school community. The solutions include the following: **Solution 1**-Reimagine the learning experience through the curation of new school wide policies and instructional practices, **Solution 2**-Reimagine ways to thrive by engaging in joyful, culturally affirming, culturally responsive, anti-racist learning experiences, and **Solution 3**- Reimagine supports through relationship building, self-care, mindful practice, trauma informed health and wellbeing.

### **Solution 1 - Reimagining Learning Experience: Curating New School Wide Policies & Instructional Practices**

The instructional practices at our school sit at the intersection of best practices in instruction and culturally responsive teaching and learning. We use a guided release model that includes the following components in sequence: "I Do" - this occurs at the beginning of the lesson when teachers explicitly model a new concept, skill or strategy; "We Do" - where student discourse and teacher facilitation around that new concept, skill, or strategy take place; and "You Do" - where students work independently with the new concept, skill, or strategy as teachers informally assess, asks probing questions, and check for understanding (Hunter, n.d.; Schmoker, 2018).

The impact of these research-based practices in instruction is amplified when couched in culturally responsive contexts that reflect students' identities, histories, and experiences. Therefore, our school integrates Dr. Ghodly Muhammad's (2000) HILL model into which includes the 4 pillars of histories, identities, literacies, and liberation. In integrating this model within daily instruction, our teachers consider the following pursuits: Identity, students' knowledge and affirmation of self and others; Skills, students' content area skills and proficiencies; Intellect, students' knowledge put into action; Criticality, students' understanding of oppression, equity, and anti-racism; and Joy, students' connection to joy within themselves or others. For example, in a fourth-grade literacy unit that studied living legends, students engaged in textual analysis and learned to cite evidence using a text that centered on Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Integrated with our gradual release model, the lesson rooted in the HILL framework expected the following outcomes of students consistent with the five pursuits mentioned above: Identity, "I can name Sonia Sotomayor as the first Puerto Rican Supreme Court Justice;" Skills, "I can cite text evidence that proves this fact from the book *National Geographic Readers: Sonia Sotomayor*;" Intellect, "I can learn about challenges and life in the city;" Criticality, "I can recognize that poverty can be connected to crime in neighborhoods;" and Joy, "I can learn how working hard towards a goal can give me joy." While this model is rooted in research-based best practices and reflects students' identities, histories, and experiences, additional supports beyond whole-group instruction are necessary to provide the highest quality education accessible to all students.

Therefore, within our blocks of instruction, we follow our gradual release model with small groups and time for reflection and sharing out. During small groups, teachers provide additional instruction and differentiation that may look like providing students multiple entering points into the same grade level texts or word problems, using various evidence-based scaffolds such as graphic organizers or process charts, and reteaching by breaking down the new concept, skill, or strategy into manageable chunks. Our small groups can be organized around various skills and strategies, or they can be based on mastery of standards. At the end of the instructional block, students have the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned and shared out. This helps students synthesize their understanding and create a culture of continuous learning from each other.

To be strategic with our groupings, we diligently monitor progress over time using various informal and benchmark assessments. (William, 2011). This can take the form of informal checks for understanding based on anecdotal observations and student discourse, exit tickets, performance tasks, and other forms of student work. Our benchmark assessments that are conducted three to four times a year in ELA and math provide comprehensive diagnostic data on student mastery of grade-level standards. Based on analysis of this data using an adapted data-driven protocol (School Reform Initiative, 2002), faculty determine how to best plan instruction and organize their small groups to meet the needs of all their students.

In addition, our school engages in a cycle of six-eight weeks, where teachers focus on a standard that data indicates needs to be mastered by the whole class or grade. These efforts run alongside our daily instruction and provide additional supports to students to master essential standards that are foundational to their respective grade. Faculty on grade-level teams analyze student work and collaborate on a bi-weekly basis throughout the cycle to identify student strengths and successes, errors and conceptual misunderstandings, the learning opportunity to advance student thinking, and an action plan rooted in research-based strategies to move student learning forward.

Supplementing these layers of support, our faculty collaborate with student teachers and other professionals to provide tutoring and extended learning time (ELT) at the end of the typical school day. The student data informs this work and provides us with a strategic approach to support unfinished learning.

It should also be mentioned that supporting students' learning is a partnership between the school and families, where each stakeholder has unique perspectives and strengths that are maximized when working together (Friend & Cook, 2010; Gestwicki, 2010). Therefore, the school leadership and faculty communicate what students are learning and how they are performing on a regular basis. This is predominantly done through a school-wide digital communication platform; however, we also communicate with families via phone calls, text, email, and video conferencing, in addition to sending home monthly progress reports. Yet, student data, learning, and progress is not only discussed by the school and families, but also with the students as well.

It is important for students to understand their current status and progress with their achievement so they can set goals and take responsibility for their learning. Faculty regularly discuss students' data with them based on a variety of measures, including benchmark assessments, performance tasks, and focus standard work. Students maintain a data folder that is reviewed frequently throughout the school year. Students continuously analyze and reflect on the data, set goals, and monitor their progress. At

times, students also determine the steps needed to improve and advance their own learning.

This further establishes a classroom culture of continuous learning, which is also evidence in our approach to project-based learning and creating opportunities for real-world connections. Our classroom culture is also rooted in relationships and social-emotional learning. When students are valued and their experiences are validated, they are better able to learn and form healthy relationships with each other. At times, when interactions become difficult, we prioritize reflection and restorative practices to help students develop their social-emotional competencies and maintain harmonious relationships.

With COVID, we have had to be flexible and creative with how we implement the essential aspects of our instruction and learning experiences. Our school has made shifts to determine priority learning based on foundational grade-level expectations, incorporate technology to create digital learning environments and enhance communication and collaboration, and ensure social-emotional and culturally responsive learning drive our efforts.

### **Solution 2 - Reimagining Ways to Thrive: Engaging in Joyful, Culturally Affirming, Culturally Responsive, Anti-Racist Learning Experiences**

Race may be a social construct. However, this idea does not make the effects and implications of a racist society any less real or harmful for Indigenous, Black, and Brown people. How can we live and thrive in an environment that is not consistently inclusive of our culture and identities? To do so, educators must reimagine ways that both students and teachers can thrive within learning and teaching settings. First, as school leaders we must consider our own racial autobiographies and narratives before we can begin to understand the diverse narratives of our students. We must begin to shovel deeper into our own past before we advise our students to start shoveling. As educators, we question the ways we might connect to what students may surface. How will we help young people reason or understand what they may find on this cultural excavation? Dr. Mark A. Gooden at Teachers' College has stated that writing a racial autobiography helps principals surface unexamined meanings of race personally and its impact on school leadership and America by increasing awareness of race, building community within and beyond the school, and taking anti-racist action to change structures (Gooden, 2021).

Culturally responsive and sustaining education is a cultural view of learning and human development in which multiple forms of diversity (e.g., race, social class, gender, language, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, ability) are recognized, understood, and regarded as indispensable resources of knowledge for rigorous training and learning (Peoples, Bolisetty, 2022). After reading the previous statement, one may conclude that the curriculum was not previously responsive or sustaining which may imply that education has been harmful to the students of New York State in the past. For these reasons, CRSE practices are a step towards acknowledging and addressing the systemic inequities that continue to impact Indigenous, Black, and Brown peoples of the world.

Empirical studies find that teachers who center students' culture in the classroom by promoting high expectations, cultural competence, and critical consciousness improve student academic achievement, capacity for critical thinking, empowered racial/ethnic identity, civic activism, and overall school experience (Arsonson & Laughter, 2016; Martell, 2013; Aldana et al, 2012; Thomas, Davidson, & McAdoo, 2008; Byrd, 2016). Culturally relevant teachers raise students' critical consciousness by addressing issues of social justice and racial inequality in the classroom. Through a culturally responsive



approach, teachers may encourage students to identify problems in their communities and discuss ways to address them. Teachers acknowledge societal oppression and encourage students to notice how those dynamics are evident in their everyday lives. Teachers trained in culturally responsive and sustaining education may empower students in the classroom and give students opportunities to participate in decision making that is relevant to their lives and experiences (Byrd, 2016).

There are research-based frameworks which support culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy. One of these frameworks is Gholdy Muhammad's Historically Responsive Literacy framework referenced earlier. Muhammad's framework uses skills and proficiencies interchangeably to denote competence, ability, and expertise based on what educators deem to be important for student learning in each content area. Skills and intellectualism are separate facets when modeling this approach in the classroom. Knowledge and intellect, the third layer of this approach includes what we want students to become smarter about, not decoding and fluency which are reading skills. Another way to differentiate is that skills are typically found in curriculum and learning standards, and intellectual goals are derived from the content of the text. The fourth layer of this CRSE approach is criticality. This layer focuses on the ability to read print and non-print text with a lens of understanding how power, oppression, and privilege are present. A push for criticality in learning standards is helping young people, including those from backgrounds that may be historically marginalized, to investigate perspectives from marginalized standpoints (Muhammad, 2016). Classroom teachers must integrate the identities, intellectualism, and criticality of their students while supporting students in achieving proficiency of literacy skills in all content areas of instruction.

In this climate of high stakes testing and accountability, both visual arts and social studies often are marginalized in the elementary school curriculum (Samuels, 2019). Teaching and learning in these areas typically are not provided adequate instructional time in the elementary classroom and because social studies is not included in the testing agenda in district and state standardized tests, elementary teachers are choosing to spend time teaching other skills that will boost test scores (Burstein, Curtis, & Hutton, 2006.) In summary, it is imperative to model interdisciplinary instruction that includes a culturally responsive approach to provide adequate instructional time in elementary classrooms. Students who are already in marginalized positions do not deserve marginalized content or instruction. Thematic units of study and project-based learning can support teachers in meeting this instructional challenge. Teaching thematically inspires greater intellectual curiosity, promotes deeper engagement with the past, and empowers students to find their own answers to the problems of society. Thematic teaching is about students actively constructing their own knowledge, drawing on real-life experiences and incorporating issues of social justice that they face in their everyday lives (Samuels, 2019).

### **Solution 3 - Reimagining Supports: Relationship Building, Self-Care, Mindful Practice, Trauma Informed, Health and Wellbeing**

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in our school focuses on developing a wide range of students' interpersonal, self-regulatory, and emotional competencies. We utilize mindfulness-based SEL programs that aim to develop these competencies through the cultivation of children's ability to pay attention to the present moment with curiosity and nonjudgment (Bakosh et al., 2016; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness-based SEL programs are increasingly being used with children and adolescents to support a range of health, academic, and social outcomes. This is an approach that is widely modeled at our school. Classroom teachers often begin with SEL goal setting. This is one pathway to students

developing a growth mindset. It is important for teachers to support students in expressing emotions and solving conflict in ways that are appropriate to themselves and others around them. Taking a brain break is another strategy that can support students in maintaining an emotional balance in the classroom. Brain breaks are planned learning activity shifts that mobilize different networks of the brain. These shifts allow those regions that are blocked by stress or high-intensity work to revitalize. Brain breaks, by switching activity to different brain networks, allow the resting pathways to restore their calm focus and foster optimal mood, attention, and memory (Willis, 2016). In our school community, brain breaks are practiced during our 90-minute Literacy and mathematics blocks to maintain student focus and engagement. These brain breaks teach children how to regulate their breathing and offer insight into additional mindful practices at our school community which is meditation and yoga. These practices are modeled in our day school and extended after school program as well. During the day, meditation is used before we begin classroom instruction. Each class has selected student meditation and self-awareness leaders who lead their peers through daily affirmations in the morning and in the afternoon once the lunch period has ended. In our afterschool program, all students in grades kindergarten through five can learn about the practice of yoga from a trained and certified instructor. Meditation and yoga provide students time to reengage with themselves and connect to their learnings. Establishing a partnership with Harlem Grown has enabled our school community to become more mindful about how we feel and what we eat. Our school community is learning that healthy food grows healthy minds. Harlem Grown empowers community members through sustainable gardens and directly impacts youth ([www.harlemgrown.org](http://www.harlemgrown.org)).

Children spend more time in school than in any other formal institutional structure. As such, schools play a key part in children's development, from peer relationships and social interactions to academic attainment and cognitive progress, emotional control and behavioral expectations, and physical and moral development. All these areas are reciprocally affected by mental health (Fazel, Hoagwood, Stephan, Ford, 2015). At our school, there are interventions in place to support the mental health of all students and adults. A guidance counselor and a social worker are on site daily for students and faculty. The services offered by the school crisis team also extend outside of the school building to the family members of students as well. In addition, the school guidance counselor, social worker, and school administrators provide in person and virtual support via parent workshops and self-care sessions. These self-care sessions include meditation and yoga workshops, informational sessions on the middle school application process, and preventative strategies for handling conflict and stress in daily life. The special education team, school nurse, school crisis team, social worker, guidance counselor, yoga and meditation are practices that serve as an umbrella of support.

Family engagement as a motivator for student achievement is an important practice which has seen impressive results. Kraft (2017) discussed the effects of creating better communication systems to bridge the gap between homes and schools. This research demonstrates that when parents were engaged through phone calls more regularly, student achievement in completing homework increased. For these reasons, supporting families in the academic success of their child is essential to the thriving of the school community. Families in the school community receive academic support in multiple ways. Class Dojo is a digital application which assists teachers in communicating with parents. Teachers and co-teachers can share student work with families via digital portfolios on Class Dojo. This digital platform has become most valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Class Dojo enables classroom teachers, cluster teachers, school administrators, and extended families to remain engaged and knowledgeable about their

school community. Parents are also able to spend time in community with one another talking through their successes and challenges under the guidance and support of our school social worker at a weekly evening support group.

School systems have traditionally used a prescriptive and, oftentimes, punitive framework to address misbehavior. Otherwise known as zero tolerance policies, these frameworks include exclusionary practices (i.e., office referral, suspension, expulsion) that involve the removal of the offender from the context of the incident and isolating the student from others involved and their school community. Zero tolerance policies, introduced in the 1990s, intensified these exclusionary practices to maintain order within schools (Welch & Payne, 2012). Some methods of restorative practices used are the check in and check out, affective statements, peer mediation, and restorative circles. The first method, checking in and checking out, is a process that is done at the beginning and ending of each school day. This restorative practice provides opportunities for students to express themselves and consider the thoughts and emotions of their peers. Students use Yale Institute for Emotional Intelligence's RULER Mood Meter tool to describe their energy and pleasantness to their peers. The second method, affective statements, are sentences that contain a feeling, which is used in response to negative or positive events in the classroom or school. Students use affirmative statements during small group discussions and conflict resolution sessions with their peers. The third method is called peer mediation. During peer mediation sessions, two trained student mediators assist fellow students, who are in conflict, to resolve their problems. The peer mediators work in pairs and the discussion usually takes place in a calming corner on the upper floors of our school building. Teachers and the mental health team, which includes the guidance counselor and social worker, are aware of these scheduled meetings that take place in a private space and are nearby for additional support and assistance. The fourth method used at our school is called restorative circles. This method is used when three or more students have caused harm to others or have been harmed themselves. Students usually sit in a circle and address who has been harmed and what needs to be done to make things right. Sometimes students use a tool called The Blueprint which is part of the RULER program at Yale University. The Blueprint serves as a reflection tool for self-improvement and future conflicts. Lastly, these restorative circles are usually performed at the end of the week in our classrooms as needed.

### **Reimagining Partnerships: Engaging Stakeholders as Design Partners**

Our school has many partnerships that support student learning and development. Some of them support academic achievement directly, such as Southern Bronx Overall Economic Development (SoBro), our afterschool provider that provides additional instruction and tutoring to support unfinished learning. Other partners support us in other ways, such as Juilliard, who provide music instruction and learning, Studio Museum in Harlem, who provide art instruction and learning, and The Meeting House, who support us with families. Additional partners such as the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence support us with the implementation of RULER, a systematic approach to social-emotional learning that helps students to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate their emotions and feelings (RULER, 2021). One daily practice that we employ is the use of a tool called the "Mood Meter." Each morning in each class, student self-awareness leaders facilitate a Mood Meter check-in where students reflect and share how they are feeling in the moment by using words that characterize the level of pleasantness and energy they are experiencing. Students also explain the reasons why they are feeling the way they do. This has led to greater self- and social-awareness, better self-management, and relationship skills, as well as improved decision-making. This is

evidenced by a reduction in dysregulation and challenging relationships between peers as well as an increase in constructive responses to conflict. We have also partnered with local universities such as Barnard College and Teachers College, Columbia University, who provide our students with opportunities for project-based learning and open-ended tasks to develop inquiry and critical thinking around authentic problems. Currently, the Center for Technology and School Change (CTSC) at Teachers College has launched a four-year implementation research initiative called Systemic Transformation for Inquiry Learning Environments for STEM (STILE). Faculty in Kindergarten, second grade, fifth grade, and STEM are working with their researchers to design inquiry-based units of study around authentic problems relevant to students and their school community. The units are rooted in design thinking (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and encourage students to apply a line of questioning to fully understand challenges in their communities and potential ways to address them. Presently, the faculty participating in the initiative are collaboratively designing a unit that addresses the interdependence of living organisms as they explore the challenges posed by feral cats residing in their school yard. Early results from launching the unit have demonstrated an increase in student engagement, autonomy, problem-solving, critical thinking, and joy.

Also out of Teachers College is the Black Education Research Collective (BERC). BERC focuses on educational research at the intersections of Black history, culture, politics, and leadership. Currently, they are piloting a K-12 interdisciplinary Black studies curriculum for New York City schools. The program introduces students to topics “exploring early African civilizations, the continuum of the Black experience in America, the contributions and accomplishments of peoples of the African diaspora as well as the impact of systemic and institutional racism on all members of society” (Teachers College, Columbia University, 2021). At our school, the pilot is being implemented in kindergarten and fourth grade with great success. Recently, students learned about Adinkra symbols; symbols from Ghana that represent concepts or aphorisms that are used extensively in fabrics, logos, and pottery. The students’ study has enabled them to learn how symbols express culture and facilitate understanding of beliefs or experiences. As the content is relevant to our student’s lives and reflective of their histories and identities, we have seen an increased in student engagement and voice.

Furthermore, this year, we partnered with the Imagine Schools Office of School Design and received a grant to develop a school-wide culturally responsive mathematics curriculum infused with social-emotional learning. This initiative was launched to address unfinished learning in math, the subject where performance was hit hardest for us during COVID. A team of one faculty member of each grade was assembled to discuss the data and conduct research on how to make our mathematics curriculum more culturally responsive. A key aspect of this process was working together with families, students, and other faculty to survey their beliefs, perceptions, and feelings about math and our practices and how they could be improved. As a result, our revised unit plan and instructional templates now center on students’ cultural experiences, identities, histories, and social-emotional learning. We are in the process of presenting our work to a broader stakeholder team that supports our school including the parent-teacher association, community-based organizations that support equity work, and the Imagine Schools Office of School Design. Based on their feedback, we will further revise our units towards implementing a pilot in Spring 2022.

During this time of COVID and even pre-pandemic, partnerships have played an important role in supporting student learning. They have allowed us to effectively leverage community resources to provide the highest quality educational experience to

our students that meets their academic, social, and emotional needs and validates their identities, experiences, and histories. Together, partnerships have enabled us to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices and create a culture of continuous learning where each stakeholder makes unique contributions and student growth is at the forefront.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations: The Way Forward**

The pandemic has forced many schools to re-evaluate the type of learning environment that is needed to address the new and varied supports required for our students and their families. Additionally, we must address the ways in which we support and uplift our educators and support staff to ensure their mental, emotional and physical well-being during a time where our capacities have been forced to widen. We have found that at the core of all that we have and will continue to experience is rooted in relationships. The quality of the relationships we have as a staff, the authentic relationships we have with our students and their families and our ability to co-create and collaborate as a school community is key. We must continue to refocus our attention not on “learning loss” but a strengths-based approach to addressing “unfinished learning” that we know will take more than a year to rectify. Social emotional learning for students and the adults who care for them will be needed. The climate of strain on everyone’s mental health continues to be an area we cannot avoid. The effects of trauma are ever present. Horsford 2021, reminds us that “repeated traumatic events over the last year have shined a bright light on the collective pain, loss, and suffering of the African American community. And it will continue to endure in ways we cannot yet apprehend”. Providing our students, staff, and families a voice and avenue to express their emotions and engaging them in a curriculum that includes social justice can provide them a way to combat racial trauma. Our students, staff and families must be able to envision a light at the end of the tunnel if they are to continue pushing forward with purpose and optimism. We need to center our humanity and exercise compassion for ourselves and for others. We want to continue to reimagine the ways we can deepen and enhance a purposeful, targeted learning experience for our children through a sense of optimism and unlimited creative possibilities. This approach must be holistic, centering the social, emotional, cultural health and well-being for our full school community. And we must do this together.

### **Acknowledgement**

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