

# Culturally Relevant Leadership and Emancipatory Leadership: Linking Black Education and Social Justice Struggles Going Forward

Honey Walrond

## Abstract

In January 2020, in response to the criticism that New York City schools don't reflect the experiences of students of color, the New York State Education Department (2020) released the *Culturally responsive and sustaining Education Framework*. While the culturally responsive and sustaining education (CR-SE) initiative in New York City schools aims to bring a well-rounded curriculum that centers on many cultures into the classroom, there is still a lack of diverse curriculum and reading material (Gooden, 2019). Discussion of how CR-SE can serve as an emancipatory approach in Black education has been lacking since its creation. To get a better understanding of the liberating and emancipatory practices CR-SE offers, I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Sonya Douglass.

**Keywords:** culturally responsive and sustaining education, Black education, the scale framework for emancipatory education and leadership

## Introduction

Dr. Douglass is Professor of Education Leadership at Columbia University Teachers College, where she conducts research and teaches courses on the politics of race and inequality in education. She has published more than 20 articles in journals including *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Education Policy*, and *Teachers College Record*, edited three books on educational equity and leadership, and authored two award-winning books: *Learning in a Burning House: Educational Inequality, Ideology, and (Dis)Integration* and *The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality: Toward Democratic Possibilities for Schooling* (with Janelle T. Scott and Gary L. Anderson). Since 2016, Dr. Douglass has served as co-director of the Urban Education Leaders Program at Teachers College, which is an Ed.D. program for practicing and aspiring district-level education leaders committed to equity, justice, and excellence. In 2017, Dr. Douglass founded the Black Education Research Collective (BERC) to convene scholars devoted to conducting, translating, and disseminating research that leads to improved educational opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for Black children and youth. In 2020, she launched the SDH Collaborative (affectionately known as "the Lab") to create a generative and supportive research and learning environment for current and former students interested in solving education problems through research, advocacy, and action.

In this conversation with Dr. Douglass, she shared insights into the 2021 study, *Black Education in the Wake of COVID-19 & Systemic Racism: Toward a Theory of Change & Action*, and what the prospects are for CR-SE pedagogy going forward. We also discussed the importance of a PK-12 interdisciplinary Black Studies curriculum for New York City students; the COVID-19 pandemic as a portal for educators; *The SCALE Framework for Emancipatory Education and Leadership* as a conceptual tool designed to support learners and leaders of all ages at the classroom, school, and district levels; and where it is actually possible to measure CR-SE.

## Interview

**Honey Walrond:** During the summer of 2021, the BERC released *Black Education in the Wake of COVID-19 & Systemic Racism: Toward a Theory of Change & Action*. What has the study revealed about CR-SE teaching and learning practices, going forward?

**Dr. Douglass:** The study spoke extensively about the need to ensure that teachers are better prepared and equipped to educate Black students in particular. And that includes everything from just understanding their experience as Black children to us understanding Black history and culture, and how that knowledge should be shaping teaching and leadership. So the study, I think, confirms what we already knew, but it really showed that, during COVID and given the challenges associated with virtual learning and remote learning, there's still great need as it relates to the preparation of teachers and leaders around culturally responsive and sustaining education.

**Honey Walrond:** The study also spoke to how, “despite school districts preparing to open their physical school buildings safely in September, they remain unprepared to educate Black students effectively while ensuring their safety and well-being” (Horsford et al., 2021, 15). How can school districts be sure to center on culturally responsive learning approaches under such conditions?

**Dr. Douglass:** I think school districts, you know, they have a huge responsibility right now and are facing tremendous challenges. But, as we really think about the school system, hopefully, once we emerge out of this pandemic that we're still confronted with, that we will take this as a time to reflect on what we want from our schools and what the role of schools and school districts should be in supporting families and communities. There should be serious investment in our teachers, counselors, our capacity to support students with social-emotional learning and mental health supports. But, just making sure that we're doing the reflective work as individuals and as institutional leaders to ensure that we're meeting the needs of all students, . . . that, I think, begins with professional learning, professional development, and, again, reexamining the practices that we've been engaging in up to this point and thinking about how we can ensure that we are creating spaces of belonging, support, and safety for all students.

**Honey Walrond:** Why is the BERC Education Equity Action Plan PK-12 interdisciplinary Black Studies curriculum important for New York City students right now?

**Dr. Douglass:** Well, we are so excited to be able to play a role in the development of this historic curriculum. It's long overdue, but we definitely want to seize this moment and are seeing it as an opportunity to transform our schools in our educational system by integrating and incorporating the content, the knowledge, experiences, and the wisdom of practice that we know is reflected in the Black Studies curriculum. And so, we are so excited about what this will mean for all students in understanding that there is not one particular worldview or one cultural tradition or one way of being in the world, but that there's much that we can learn from African civilizations, from Black history, from the cultural traditions of peoples of African descent, and that will enrich not only the experiences and educational opportunities for Black students but for all of the students in New York City.

**Honey Walrond:** The BERC COVID study stated that “many parents spoke to the responsibility they have to correct racist curricula and supplement their child's schooling so they are accurately learning about the history of the U.S., Black history, and the Black experience in America” (Horsford et al., 2021, 15). In what ways does the Black Studies curriculum serve as a stand-alone curriculum and not a supplement?

**Dr. Douglass:** Well, I think what we are experiencing even as we embark on the development of the curriculum is how an intentional Black Studies curriculum requires us to engage in transformation. I mean, it's really transforming the way that we think about content, the way that we think about teaching and learning and leadership, and the role that students, parents, community members, and educators play in education . . . I think in addition to it being a curriculum that can stand on its own, the process of developing this curriculum really requires us to think about what is currently

being taught in schools, how certain communities and students are not represented in that curriculum, and how we can ensure that our children are seen and see themselves in the curriculum . . . It's part of our larger value commitments to equity and justice, in our communities and in society.

**Honey Walrond:** You bring up transformation, which I think is a very important keyword right now. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, who is, you know, the leading theorist around culturally responsive education, sees the COVID pandemic as a portal for educators across the country to rethink how they teach and how students learn. What is *The SCALE Framework* and how does it connect to an emancipatory approach toward education?

**Dr. Douglass:** The SCALE Framework [see Image 1] is actually *The SCALE Framework for Emancipatory Education and Leadership*, and it's a conceptual tool for teachers, leaders, and learning organizations that are committed to educational equality and freedom. The acronym SCALE refers to the five concepts associated with the framework, which include self-knowledge, culture, agency, liberation, and ethics/enduring values. And so SCALE provides an accessible approach to advancing equity within classrooms and organizations from the inside out through culturally relevant teaching and leadership practices that are committed to the affirmative development of learners of all ages everywhere—everyone, from the preschool student to the school board member. It also acknowledges the historical and structural imbalances in power that are characteristic of organizations and institutions in the United States, which were largely established under a system of separate but equal, while recognizing that our systems have always been separate but they've never been equal. And so, as a corrective to these systems, cultures, and ideologies, which have privileged one particular set of knowledge claims, contributions, and worldviews, SCALE represents a shift from the rhetoric of diversity, equity, and inclusion toward an emancipatory vision of education and leadership that's committed to ensuring that learners and leaders of all cultures and backgrounds are integrated into the vision that values culture, operations, and leadership of the organizations in which they learn and they lead.

**Honey Walrond:** Now we have an understanding of what culturally relevant leadership is and emancipatory leadership. How would you say it connects the Black education and social justice struggles going forward?

IMAGE 1.

**THE SCALE FRAMEWORK FOR EMANCIPATORY EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP**



**Dr. Douglass:** So, I think culturally relevant leadership culture, responsive leadership, and emancipatory leadership—in many ways they all reflect what has been the long freedom struggle, the long Black freedom struggle for equal education. And I think that is what's so powerful. What we tried to do here at the Black Education Research Collective is to make those connections very clear, to make sure that we are linking the work that we're doing currently to those historic struggles by recognizing the work of our ancestors and of our elders and the great challenges that they had to overcome. Much of our work is simply taking the lessons that we've learned from them, taking their wisdom and their experiences to help strengthen us and to give us the tools that we need to create the type of future that we want to see for our children.

**Honey Walrond:** In conversation about an emancipatory approach to education, there has been a lot of talk around decolonization. How would you say culturally relevant and emancipatory leadership go together, considering that any model of emancipation is shaped by . . . oppressive culture?

**Dr. Douglass:** I think emancipatory leadership—in my view it's really geared toward acknowledging the systems of domination and oppression that exist. And so, while I believe that culturally relevant pedagogy as theorized by Gloria Ladson Billings certainly addresses those issues of power and socio-political context, I think some of the narratives around culturally relevant education have not centered this issue of power and domination in ways that are really important. And so, emancipatory leadership is really reminding us again that the current system that we're operating in was not designed to serve our students well, and in fact that, while education can be emancipatory, it can also be a form of enslavement. And so, we are recognizing again the power of knowledge, whose knowledge we're using, and whose knowledge we're valuing. That emancipatory leadership is as much about freeing our minds from the ideologies that can continue to subjugate us as it is about understanding our rights of citizenship and the rights that were afforded us under the protection of the law.

**Honey Walrond:** Dr. Edmund Gordon, whom you have the privilege of working closely with . . . at Teachers College, is himself a disciple, a student of W. E. B. DuBois. Dr. Gordon recognizes that all cultural groups are capable of excellence and that its expressions are myriad, as our human family is diverse. Dr. Gordon speaks specifically to this in his 2019 book, *Human Variance and Assessment for Learning*. Is CR-SE something we can actually measure and, if so, in what ways?

**Dr. Douglass:** Now, this is a great question. I obviously admire the amazing work and contributions of Professor Gordon and his scholarship, and it certainly is informing the work that we're doing on the Black Studies curriculum and how we even think about teaching and learning, given all of the new science that we have around how humans learn. We're actually pursuing this question as part of a project funded by the Institute of Education Sciences on culturally responsive schools where we're developing a set of rubrics to help individuals determine what a culturally responsive school actually looks like. But in terms of measurement, I guess what I would say is that, although we in education often are focused on advancing equity, diversity, inclusion, and integration, to me those are actually qualities of a culturally responsive educational system. And so, if we are successful . . . the measures that we'll see will be schools that are integrated, schools that do reflect diversity, schools where all children have access to opportunity, and . . . rather than value what we measure, we will be at a place where we can measure what we truly value.

*To learn more about the Black Education Research Collective, visit [blackedresearch.org](http://blackedresearch.org).*

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