

Education Beyond the Ivory Tower

Dr. Kesi Augustine

BHSECQ BLM Day of Action
January 28, 2020

Overview

This discussion explores some of the central differences in the curriculum and culture of education that Dr. Augustine has experienced while teaching at two different Bard sites, one that is predominantly white and elite, and the other predominantly Black, with an unscreened population. We will use these different worlds of learning to envision what educational freedom and justice should look like for Black students in New York City.

Me!! & my path

- Ivory tower. BHSECM '08, Oxford '11, Williams '12, NYU '18.
- Education an ongoing question within black community since Emancipation (*at least*). Weeksville → CRM → today
- Bettina Love, bell hooks, Monique Morris: educators who argue that teaching with love is an exercise in abolition and freedom. Paradigm shift.



Transitioning Out

- **HS teaching:** loneliness; was more isolation worth becoming a professor???
- **Service:** privileged family (2 parents, middle class) and for generations of our lives, we have devoted ourselves to service work.
- **Purpose:** Want to share more, more often, learn how to be part of communities, and step into a leadership role.

My work (today's focus)

BHSECM (2017 - 2019) and Urban Assembly School of Music and Art (2019 - present).

- BHSECM made me who I am today and that's why I critique the school, and Bard as a whole.
- The differences/similarities between these schools helps us to notice many of the issues that plague the Department of Education today.
 “New York's dirty secret is that we have one of the most deeply segregated school systems in the country.” --Mark Winston Griffith, *School Colors*, episode 8
- 3 sections: “Student Body,” “Culture of Teaching and Learning,” and “Resources.”

BHSECM - Student Body



2018-2019 - Predominantly white. 40% white, 29% Asian, 18% Latinx, 11% Black, 2% other.

Even though some of the numbers are balancing out between racial representation, I argue that BHSECM still largely respects and promotes white cultural values the most.

BHSECM - Student Body

--Screened. Seeks the best of the best (attendance, tests) and students with a certain Bard “X factor” (for me its a willingness to be authentic, to question).



We see NYC slowly but loudly critiquing practices like these: on Monday Jan 13, 2020, Public Advocate Jumanee Williams protested with Teens Take Charge.

BHSECM - Student Body



“Teens Take Charge has vowed to strike every Monday until the city’s Department of Education complies with their list of demands, including doing away with the school system’s screening process, and allowing all schools to admit both low- and high-achieving students.” Ideally screened schools will be phased out and we’ll recognize these practices as outdated and unequitable. (amny, Jan 14, 2020, [p. 14](#)).

BHSECM - Student Body

--Special education

Last year, BHSECM was working to build its special education department and integrate it into the school in an intentional way. Some teachers responded to this with support, others with confusion. This reflects a systemic issue in NYC concerning what assumptions we are working with when we design “high caliber” classrooms.

On January 15, 2020, Public Advocate Jumanee Williams argued in an Op Ed that “the separation of ‘gifted and talented’ students is itself flawed” as is “the implicit idea that students outside” of gifted and talented programs lack certain abilities.” He’s speaking specifically about elementary schools, but this resonates with high schools, too. **“Enrichment cannot be about privilege.”**

BHSECM - Culture of Teaching and Learning

***Academic / Ivory Tower Model**. This has attracted some of the smartest teachers and students I've ever encountered. High on teacher autonomy.

*Very serious culture around working hard. Created some intense moments of inspiration as well as competition. Field trips are serious. Students stay after school often. Playtime is usually a foreign concept.

*Writing prioritized, though the arts department is phenomenal. There are essays and events that I will never forget coming from BHSECM.

BHSECM - Culture of Teaching and Learning

*My expertise (AfAm lit) was an elective, rather than a permanent part of the curriculum.

The push for inclusivity in all curriculums is coming from Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza now. (responses seem mixed - diversity for whom? towards what?)

*Parents more willing to critique syllabi and even go toe to toe with me as an authority.

BHSECM - Culture of Teaching and Learning

*High pressure, and poor work/life balance. Stress is a given. In fact there seems to be a lot of addition to stress at BHSECM.

*Isolated. I did start to create closer relationships with colleagues, but it took me almost two years to do so (my shy personality plays into this). Colleagues didn't always have time to share and connect with me, even if they really wanted to. Community also struggles to engage with the surrounding neighborhood.

BHSECM - Culture of Teaching and Learning

*Felt competitive with my other Black colleagues. This was the exception, not the rule. I had to confront how being the “only one” affected us all. I quickly realized how this dynamic was keeping me stagnant.

*Holding space for students to vent their frustrations due to microaggressions, etc. felt very grateful to be that space for some students, but it was also too hard to carry that weight.

BHSECM - Resources

Resources

*Plentiful resources - copy paper, going on field trips, getting speakers to come, etc.

Transitioning Out

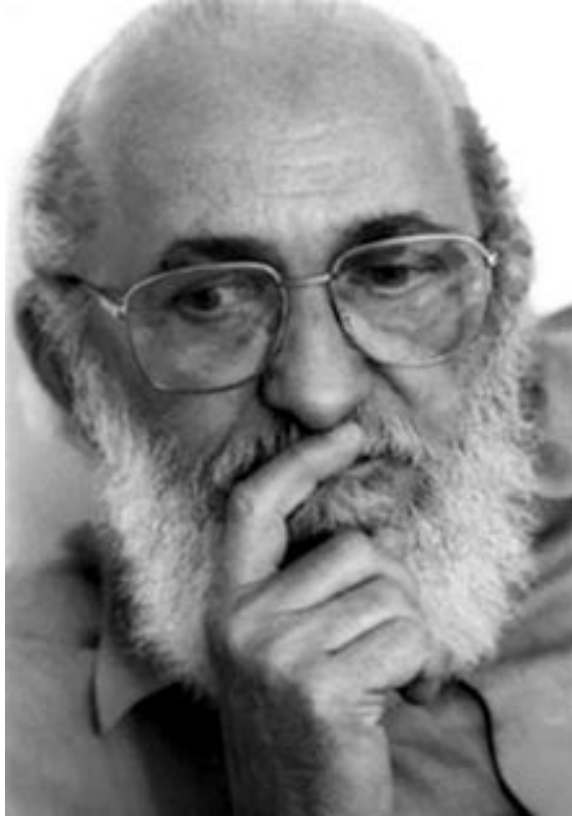
At the end of my second year as a visiting professor, I was offered a full time position at Manhattan. Instead, I pushed to expand the adjunct work I had been doing at Urban Assembly School of Music and Art, and luckily this coincided with the launch of the Bard Sequence.

The Bard Sequence brings early college courses to underserved schools, and credits students for their work. There are currently 3 sites:

- Orange HS, NJ,
- South Bronx Community Charter H.S. (opening this week!),
- and Brooklyn, NY.

The Sequence will have 5 sites open by Fall 2020.

UAMA - Student Body



Predominantly black: ~125 students total. 84% Black, ~10% Latino, 2% white, 1% other. ~90% receive free lunch.

UA system inspired by Paulo Freire.

“Freire’s work as Secretary of Education in Sao Paulo was all about making the educational process meaningful for teachers and pupils in low-income schools, and through this meaning to enhance learning and keep children in school” “Forward,” Pedagogy of the Heart, p. 17)

UAMA - Student Body

*Unscreened, yet also under-enrolled. “This is a reflection of things we cannot control.” --Principal Thompson.

Bard’s presence at UAMA doesn’t change parents’ attitudes towards the quality of predominantly black schools (re: *BHSECM open house, Fall 2019*). and parents of color may not be as familiar with Bard (...yet)

UAMA - Student Body

UAMA receives all kinds of students and can't turn any students away, so there are many more variables among student population:

--**Special education** is an ongoing concept. Several classrooms have SPED teachers working alongside an instructor during class time.

--Concerns over physical **safety** both inside and outside of the school. Metal detectors, police brutality case that directly affected our community this year (Benjamin Marshall).

Protest held for assaulted Black teen, Benjamin Marshall

Faith Osunde | 11/7/2019, 10:59 a.m.



UAMA - Student Body

--Trauma and secondary trauma. Stressors at home, in local communities.

--Homelessness. 114k NYC students are homeless (*NYT*).

*The Bard seminar is screened but is still impacted by these issues because these are our students. *How do we live a life of the mind when stress and poverty affect the shape of the mind?*

UAMA - Culture of Teaching and Learning

***Relationship-driven.** Teachers will often check in, buy socks for students in need, etc etc.

***Playtime** is encouraged during down time. The classroom I work in currently has an open door policy for students. We laugh as much as we learn together.

***Work/life balance** is more encouraged (although the culture of lesson planning is very intense, and creates work that teachers have to take home). You're not looked down upon for leaving school directly at dismissal.

UAMA - Culture of Teaching and Learning

*Building towards trusting a writing/reading culture. There are issues with **literacy**, students feeling as if they belong in the school system period. Students won't engage with texts that don't reflect them unless they see the value in the text.

***Chronic absenteeism.** 54% of students miss 18 days or more. How can we sustain the momentum of a classroom when our community members aren't always present?

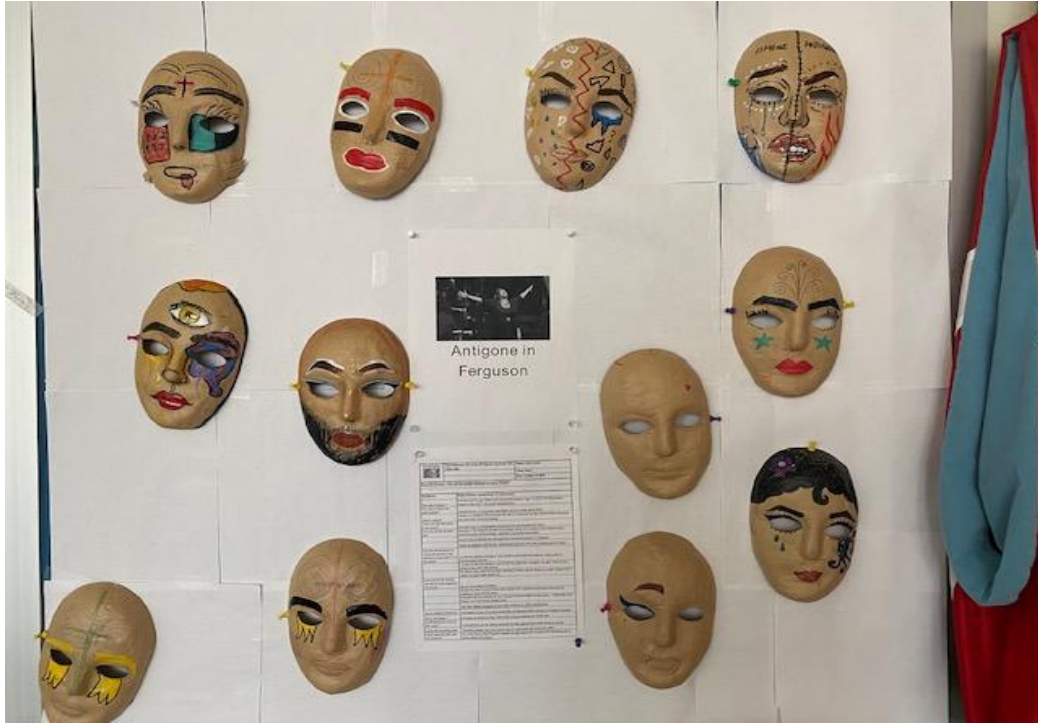
***Trauma.** Again - I can't say this enough. Understanding how traumatized students may lash out, and remembering not to take this personal as teachers (this is really hard, even for our most experienced teachers at times).

UAMA - Culture of Teaching and Learning

***Parents** an integral part of the community (some enjoy this, though others don't have the time to invest). Calling home for both “good” and “bad” feedback is an important part of the teaching here.

They might not be scholars like some BHSECM teachers, or participate in that culture, but parents do discuss course texts with their students. Education here is a process of “cross reading,” (Rudine Sims Bishop).

UAMA - Culture of Teaching and Learning



11th grade's masks for *Antigone in Ferguson* this fall.

*Needing more **access to the arts.**

There is a lot of raw creativity and genius in the students that takes a community effort to nurture. Art is a way of teaching that helps to heal a brain injured by stress and trauma, so art belongs here.

UAMA - Culture of Teaching and Learning

*My expertise informs the curriculum. Therefore I'm doing more and more work to put PoC at the center of discourse rather than at the margins.

Resources

Field trips - harder to fund, but more open minded about locations. Movie trips are a regular part of life at Urban as well as visiting local arts institutions in Brooklyn. More regulation around supplies, etc.

Black Girls at Both Schools

Well-being of Black girls in jeopardy. At Manhattan high performing BG came to me often describing how they wanted more support with their mental health. Black boys aren't doing well either but the discourse around them is more open.

At Urban however Black girls aren't invisible, but do face many challenges (as described earlier), and receive support from professionally trained staff.

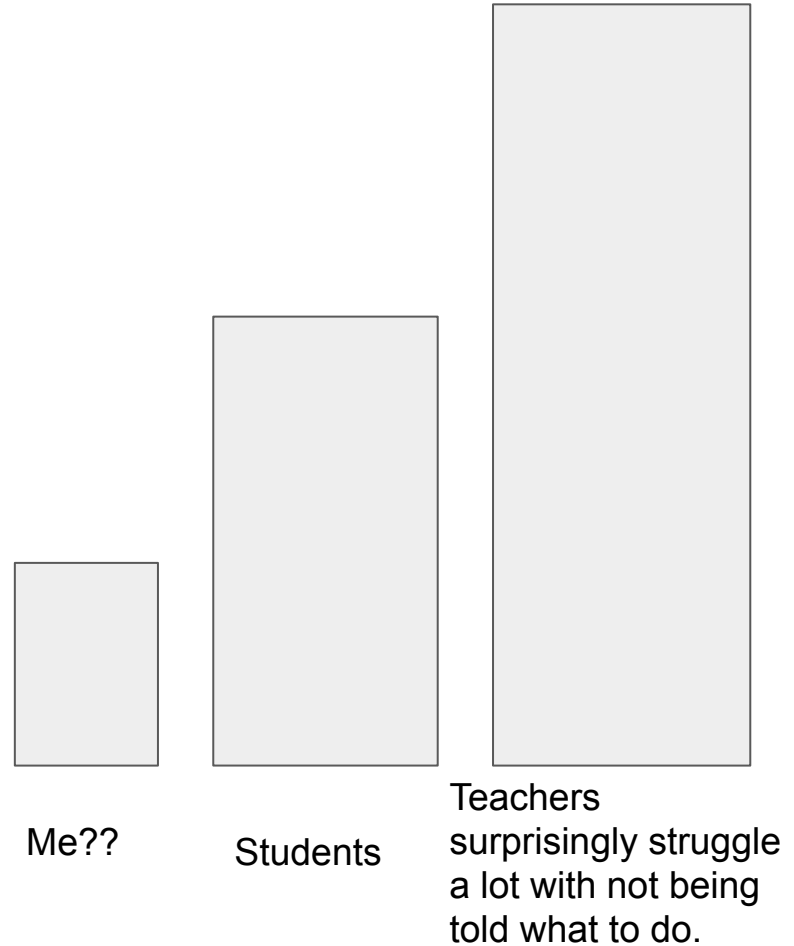
Questions for the Future

1. How will the Bard Sequence survive if attempting to impose a “Bard College” model into Black and Brown communities? How will this affect the longevity of the program?

Questions for the Future

2. Can individual instructors break down the “wall of compliance” that has impacted not just how students learn, but how teachers teach? Think about how high these stakes are for minority students whose voices are suppressed most.

(ongoing conversations with my boss)



Conclusion



Because its the first class of its kind, my classes at Urban Assembly are helping to provide some initial answers.

We were observed 10x this fall by Bard College and the Department of Education, including the mayor's team.

Conclusion

I'm still learning, un-learning, and building as I grow. So far at Urban Assembly, I have created community seminars, implemented intergenerational service work into the curriculum (Raices Senior Center), and brought free SAT prep to all students. I also do curriculum work for the Sequence as a whole.



Raices x Theater of War community talk back after *King Lear*, Dec 6 2019

***These aren't solutions for systemic issues, but they help to shift the culture of both Bard and Urban in a more open, innovative direction.

Conclusion

“What I value most about Bard at UAMA is the subjects we talk about. The text we have read in Bard have helped me shape my own opinions and helped me to be more confident in what I say.” -- **Kayla J.**

“The thing I value most about the Bard class is our socratic seminars. I feel that these seminars allow us to truly share what we are thinking when it comes to very revolutionary topics. We are putting our opinions out into the world and furthering our knowledge about topics that aren't talked about much in schools but definitely should be.” --**Raylee P.**

“I value that the class provides an opportunity for students to hold deep discussions about modern themes and events. Not many classes allow this in such a freeform manner so in that way, this class is special.” --**Christopher B.**

Bibliography

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