

JACQUELINE JORDAN IRVINE

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## *Teaching Darius to Dream*

Dear Future U.S. President,

I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE a true story with you about a brief conversation that I had with a 9-year-old African American male. This story motivates me daily to work as hard as I can to make sure caring and competent teachers reach all kinds of students, particularly poor and urban students of color. I hope you are similarly inspired.

Several years ago, I was sitting on the steps of my church, located in a poor Atlanta neighborhood, waiting for the locksmith to open my car, when an inquisitive little boy spotted me and jumped on his bike to get a closer look. After he was persuaded that he did not have to break into my car to retrieve my keys, I asked my newly made friend, Darius, to sit down to talk. I asked him the usual boring questions that adults ask children: What's your name? How old are you? Where do you go to school? What's your teacher's name? And finally, I asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" After responding quickly to the other questions, he stalled on the last, and then said, "I don't wanna be nothing." "Oh, come on," I coaxed.

“There are so many wonderful and exciting things to dream about—being a teacher, an astronaut, a businessman, a mechanic, a policeman. Just close your eyes and let me know what you see yourself doing when you get to be all grown up.” Darius hesitantly followed my directions. He closed his eyes, folded his arms over his chest, and lifted his head toward the sky as if he needed divine inspiration for such a difficult task. After 15 seconds of what appeared to be a very painful exercise, I interrupted Darius’s concentration. “What do you see?” I asked impatiently. “Tell me about your dreams.” The young boy mumbled, “Lady, I don’t see nothing and I don’t have no dreams.” Stunned by his remark, I sat speechless as Darius jumped on his bike and rode away.

Darius, this bright, energetic, handsome young man, is not likely to end up in a college or university. In fact, statistical data predict that Darius has a better chance of ending up in a state prison. If Darius ends up in prison, taxpayers will spend approximately \$20,000 a year for his incarceration. For that amount of money, we could pay his college tuition at most institutions of higher education.

Sometimes we forget that a large number of children, such as Darius, “don’t see nothing and don’t have no dreams” when we ask them to envision their futures. Their nights are filled with nightmares from horror movies or books that all children experience. Their days, however, are filled with horrors and daymares associated with the harsh realities of poverty, violence, hunger, inferior schools, drug addiction, insensitive policies, and privileged people who sigh in hopelessness and outrage, wondering why Darius’ family and community have failed him.

I have spent my entire career researching and writing about the school experiences of African American children like Darius and their schools and teachers. It should come as no surprise to you that most of the research in this area, including my own, is directed at identifying correlations, causations, and interventions aimed at reversing the dismal achievement statistics of many low-income African American students. On most indicators and measures of academic achievement, African American and Latino students’ performance lags behind their White and Asian peers. Although African American

students have shown some increased performance on standardized test scores, the gains have been relatively small and inconsistent over time. Reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal that the gap between White and Black students has widened over the past 12 years. In reading, for example, only 10 percent of African American and 13 percent of Latino fourth-grade students could read at the proficient level. Overall, average scores for 17-year-old Black students in reading and math are about the same as the averages for 13-year-old White students. In addition to low academic achievement, schools are places in which Black and poor children are disproportionately placed in low-ability level tracks and special education classes, suspended, and expelled.

Too often we focus on trying to explain *why* certain students do not achieve as well as others instead of *how* teachers can be trained to help alleviate discrepancies. We all too often neglect to focus on the cultural influences that shape teachers and what can be done to educate truly great teachers who acknowledge their cultural lens and attempt to make the necessary adjustments based on their student population.

Far too many pre- and in-service teachers proclaim a color-blind approach in teaching diverse students, hesitant to see them as cultural beings. Moreover, many practitioners believe that ethnic and cultural factors do not influence the ways in which they relate to diverse students or practice their craft. Although many teachers prefer to apply a color-blind approach to their practice, research data support the claim that an individual's culture and ethnicity does influence attitudes and behavior toward the cultural other.

In addition many teachers erroneously believe that if they recognize the race of their students or discuss issues of ethnicity in their classroom, they might be labeled as insensitive or, worse, racist. However, when teachers ignore their students' ethnic identities and their unique cultural beliefs, perceptions, values, and worldviews, they fail as culturally responsive educators. Color-blind teachers claim that they treat all students "the same," which usually means that all students are treated as if they are, or should be, both White and middle class.

Educating teachers for cultural competency is a complex undertaking that requires reflective thought, inquiry, and guidance by experienced mentors. cursory and superficial understanding of cultural differences does not result in increased student learning or significant changes in teachers' attitudes and instructional behaviors. In fact, inadequate cultural knowledge can lead to *more*, not less, hostility and stereotyping towards ethnically diverse students. I have come to understand these complex issues about culture by contemplating my unique K–12 school experiences. Rather than simply looking at rather obvious differences in ethnicity, social class, and verbal and nonverbal modes of communication, I have concluded that the most important cultural match for school success is a type of seamlessness between home and school that is connected by vision, shared values, and a sense of mission and purpose.

My schooling is an affirmation of these very points. I am a non-Catholic who attended an all-Black elementary and secondary segregated Catholic school in Alabama that was administered by White priests and nuns from the Midwest. This curious mix of conflicting cultures is pertinent and instructive because it illustrates the resilience and adaptability of African American children, in fact most children, in handling contradictory and contentious worlds.

For example, as a child, I practiced two religions—the faith of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (commonly known as the AME Church) and the faith of White Eurocentric Roman Catholicism. Although I was not Catholic, I attended mass and catechism classes five days a week in school and weekly AME Sunday school classes, church services, and youth group meetings outside of school. I understood the Catholic sacrament of private reconciliation and the AME practice of public testimonials. I admired the White Catholic priest and the Black AME preacher. Latin masses and Stations of the Cross posed no problem for me; nor did gospel singing and revivals. I unabashedly interacted with White nuns in black habits and as well as Black ushers in white uniforms. I am amazed how well I mastered this fine art of cultural switching as a child, and I am reminded that children and adults can retain and celebrate the culture of their ancestors yet be at ease in multicultural settings as well.

I believe that my school experiences did not result in school failure because there was more of a “match” than “mismatch” of cultures than was obvious to me as a child. What the Catholic nuns and priests shared with my parents and the African American community were strong, dogmatic beliefs in the power of education over oppression and discrimination and values such as discipline, achievement, and hard work. They shared a common mission and vision that was clearly articulated and passionately executed. My parents were more insistent upon my school success than the zealous nuns and priests who taught me. Although my family warned me that Catholics were “misguided in their religious perspectives,” they were to be respectfully tolerated because they held the key to our educational future. This belief in education served as a common foundation that minimized the potential for cultural misunderstanding, hostility, and alienation between the Protestant African American community and the Catholic school.

I have often used this story in classes with my mostly white pre-service teachers to explain how differences in culture, religion, race, ethnicity, poverty, and geographical origins are not excuses for student failure. I emphasize to teachers that the successful outcomes of my segregated schooling have little to do with the fact that the school was administered by a religious order. What seems more relevant is the fact that competent and dedicated teachers worked with parents and community to make a difference in the lives of all children. Caring and competent teachers make schools places where all children become successful learners and productive citizens.

Far too many programs and legislation for educational reform underestimate, ignore, or devalue the influence of teachers who look at the Dariuses of this world and see hope and possibility rather than despair. Contradicting popular portrayals of incompetent and disinterested urban teachers, I have concluded in my work that there are many teachers who make a difference in reversing the cycle of despair and school failure among African American and other non-mainstream students. The teachers with whom I have worked in CULTURES (the center I founded and directed, the Center on Urban Learning/ Teaching and Urban Research in Education and Schools)

represent the best of urban teachers. Focusing on models of best practice is an important step in finding solutions to the seemingly intractable problems in urban education.

CULTURES has enrolled more than 159 teachers from five culturally diverse school districts in the Atlanta metropolitan area. The voices of the teachers, not just researchers, are important to include because these teachers have taught me so much and because, unlike most university-based researchers, teachers have an intimate knowledge of students like Darius and their daymares. The typical CULTURES participant was an African American female teacher from an elementary or middle school in the Atlanta Public School system with more than 16 years of teaching experience. In addition to providing 40 hours of classroom instruction to these teachers, I have read hundreds of their journals, projects, lesson plans, and transcripts of their entry and exit interviews and have visited the schools and classrooms where they work.

These veteran teachers were competent in their subject areas and they were experienced and masterful at what they did. They were excited about learning new teaching methods and keeping abreast of knowledge in their instructional fields. However, these necessary but insufficient attributes were not the characteristics that distinguished them from their equally competent peers. They believed that students needed a demanding curriculum, yet they seldom were advocates of a particular teaching strategy or program. The teaching method was less important than their belief about the very nature of teaching itself. Teachers in my research not only viewed teaching as telling, guiding, and facilitating mastery of content standards, but also believed that teaching is defined as caring, “mothering,” believing, demanding the best, a calling, and disciplining.

What Darius, my own childhood education experiences, and the participants of CULTURES have shown me is that as we continue to work on research models that explain or predict conditions of children who have daymares, we have to convince policymakers and politicians with power and authority to act on behalf of what Lisa Delpit calls “other people’s children.”

We will not and cannot achieve our vision by ignoring children who have none. It is not enough to think of a child, such as Darius,

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as a research subject, a service project, or just another child who is doomed to fail. Somehow we should start to think of him and our future as inextricably linked. I am convinced, however, that eager, well-educated, committed teachers can and do make a difference. We already have the knowledge, skills, and technology to transform children's daymares into dreams. What we lack is the collective will to do so.

Mr. or Mrs. Future President, currently a myriad of government agencies are defining what a "good" teacher is. They are coming up with lists of standards and prescriptions that suggest that there is, in fact, one prototype of a good or effective teacher for all types of students, for all subjects, and for all schools. I urge you to invest energy and resources into defining the complex qualities of caring and competent teachers and providing support for programs that encourage eager and well-educated teachers to cultivate their own cultural understanding as well as a passionate conviction that all children can and must succeed.

Sincerely,  
Jacqueline Jordan Irvine