

Gholdy Muhammad

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto:** This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Thank you for listening. I appreciate you tuning in. You can always catch us on 99.1 FM in the Portland Metro on Sundays at 4:30 PM. Or tune in at your convenience, wherever you find your podcasts. That includes iTunes, Spotify, and Amazon Music.

Today, I'm speaking with Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, whose research has focused on the social and historical foundations of literacy in Black communities and how literacy development can be re-conceptualized in classrooms today. She is associate professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and is the author of a recent book called *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*.

Gholdy, it's so good to have you on the podcast today.

[00:00:45] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Yes, it's so good to be here. Thank you for having me.

[00:00:48] **Rafael Otto:** I wanted to talk about the book, *Cultivating Genius*. It offers a model for teaching and learning. So, it's really designed for educators and school leaders. And it uses a framework built on Black literacy societies going back to the 19th century. Can you talk a bit about what those societies were, and what they were designed for, and how did they influence the writing of the book?

[00:01:10] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Yeah. So, I discovered this part of history, Black history, American history, when I was a graduate student. And I read from a scholar named Elizabeth McHenry, Dorothy Porter, these are some of the writers who documented the practices of Literary Society members. And I discovered that in the early 1800s, around the 1820s, we developed these literacy clubs in urban northeastern cities, like New York, Philadelphia, Boston. And where in these cities where black folks had a little bit more liberties, they organized themselves and studied mathematics, literature, science, art, history. They lectured, they debated, they read, they wrote toward improving humanity, improving society, conditions within society. And they ultimately had a number of goals in their practices. They had goals of cultivating and advancing a sense of self and identity. They had goals of cultivating and advancing their skills, writing, reading, mathematics skills. These things that would put them in positions to also help with change.

They also had goals of cultivating their intellectualism. Their what I call in the book, criticality. Their anti-oppression, and then also their joy. And so I found the spaces to be so fascinating. I did not know why I did not learn about them in my own K-12 experience.

Like a lot of people in the United States, this part of history is not in the curriculum. It's not in the books typically. But learning about them, it's a fascinating and beautiful history. In addition to all these, this part of history was teaching me how to be a better teacher, how to be a better thinker, speaker. And so it's a lot of implications for teaching and education.

And so that's how the book really emerged, taking the knowledge from these literary societies. And they had great membership. They had, well, some membership was small, some membership was over a hundred. And they had one goal is to create more literary societies to improve toward all those goals I named.

And it was like I said, it was beautiful to read and discover. And at the same time, it was almost like. Well, why didn't we learn this before?

[00:03:55] **Rafael Otto:** Right. It's a wonderful part of our history that, I was not aware of either until I picked up your book. So I appreciate that. I also like the way you talk about literacy as this larger frame. Because so often today, when we talk about literacy or early childhood, we'll talk about a reading proficiency by third grade. It's kind of in this realm of skills and proficiency. But the way you talk about it has much deeper meaning, particularly for Black people historically.

So talk about what you mean by literacy in this historical context.

[00:04:30] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Yeah, and you're absolutely right. Most of the time we see literacy defined as skills only as cognitions as something you have or don't have; literate versus illiterate. And it wasn't those binaries for black people historically, you know. Literacy was more than just having a test or a level of literacy, like a reading level or writing level, it was more than just skills.

It was reading the world, making sense of the context around you. It was meaning-making, making sense, like, you know. So I would find some literacy practices involve hair braiding, coding, using codes and songs and algorithms to send messages, quilting. They had very unique and nuanced language practices.

And so, the way I define literacy taken from these historical examples is, of course reading, writing, speaking, thinking, meaning-making; print, but all sorts of texts, the world as texts, the land as texts. And so it's a bit of a wider way of conceptualizing literacy. And I found that the five pursuits, with the added one of joy, became a way of defining their literacy practices. So every time they were reading, writing and thinking, historically, they were building identity skills; intellect, criticality, and joy. And so that's how those five pursuits became so connected to the ways in which they define literacy.

[00:06:09] **Rafael Otto:** And there was a connection to this idea of liberation and self-determination and power. These are all part of how these communities are thinking about literacy at the time.

[00:06:21] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Exactly, and that's where the criticality comes in. Literacy was connected to goals of self-empowerment, self-reliance, self-determination. It was connected to liberation, equity, and freedom and anti-racism. It was so threaded. You did not have, you know, literacy instruction over here, and anti-racism instruction over here. It was one. You didn't have identity-learning over here, and then literacy learning over here. It was one. And so all these pursuits were very intricate to these larger ideas for equity and for freedom and liberation for all.

[00:06:59] **Rafael Otto:** Can you... So this has sort of formed the foundation of the book that you wrote. And in there, you're talking about culturally and historically- responsive literacy. These are elements of that. I want to talk a little bit more about that. Can you give us a, like... What's the overview when we're trying to learn about culturally and historically- responsive literacy? How do we best understand that? What's the simplest way to understand that?

[00:07:21] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Yeah, it is teaching students, that is not only responsive to the identities of the children themselves, but of other people. But also responsive to the times, both historically and currently. When we teach like that, we have culturally and historically- responsive literacy. Particularly where we teach five particular pursuits. That's how we know that we are teaching to respond in this way to what students need. And I call it historically responsive because these pursuits came from this rich history from Black Literary Societies. So we are using a model that responds to the historical nature of education, and what education looked like for a group of people that go a bit forgotten and unrecognized.

But these people teach us how to educate all children today. So to be historically responsive means we're taking from our ancestors in this way, Black abolitionists ancestors, we're returning to this history. We're remembering this history in order to teach children better today.

[00:08:33] **Rafael Otto:** Thank you for that. There are the four, or maybe it's five components. But I wanted to ask you about these. If we can just talk about them a little bit: Identity, skills, intellect, and criticality. And if you could describe what those are and how they might manifest in the classroom.

[00:08:50] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Identity is, within teaching and learning, you help children learn who they are. Who they're not, who they desire to be, or you teach them about people who are different than them. Identity matters because it's a refuge, it's a protection. It comes with confidence, and we want our children to have a strong sense of self. Identity is important too, because a lot of children of color have been told negative things about who they are. And by teachers too.

And so we want them to affirm and sustain their lives, and not have to feel like they have to show up being someone else in order to be accepted and validated in the school. Skills are the state standards. These are typically the proficiencies, competencies we want children to be able to do in each content area. So these are most commonly found in district state standards. Citing textual evidence, solving for X, the things we want them to do. The third pursuit is intellectualism. This is what we're applying the skills to put into action, right? So this is teaching students new people, places, things, and concepts, histories, new knowledge.

Oftentimes we teach skills and we... it has... is de-contextualized to the world and students leave without knowing what this circumference have to do with my life, with the world around me. The fourth pursuit is criticality. This is teaching students to name, understand, disrupt, agitate, question oppression. Any kind of hurt, pain, and harm in the world.

Criticality is what we are teaching and connecting our skills to so that we are making a better world. And then the fifth pursuit, I don't go deep into it, but I've been developing it since *Cultivating Genius*, is joy. Joy is teaching about beauty in the world, the elevation of humanity, aesthetics. It balances out criticality and it brings like, a certain type of embodiment for the student when they see the joy in what they're learning too. So when you're teaching all five of these pursuits together, you're really teaching holistically. You're teaching in ways that's contextualized to the students' lives into the real world, and to real-world issues and problems, and to real-world joy. We see different types of mathematics unit plans and lesson plans and science. I've been training on this model for over 12 years now. And the lessons and units that teachers send me, it's like artwork. I mean, it's like, wow, I want to be in that class.

[00:11:33] **Rafael Otto:** Right, right. I want to ask you a bit more about what that looks like in the classroom. But I wanted to also follow up on what you were talking about just a minute ago. When you're talking about identity in this idea of it's so common to experience deficit language or deficit framing, particularly surrounding the lives of children of color.

Could you just talk a bit more about the impact that has on young children and how it plays out in the classroom. And then, how do we reframe?

[00:12:06] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Yeah. You know, it's traumatic. It's trauma. It is and we know the effects. If we study trauma, if we study mental health and health wellness in general, we know the effects that trauma can have on the mind, the body, the spirit. It creates lingering effects. So if a child never sees themselves in the curriculum, cannot breathe, thrive, they're going to spend their life playing catch up.

So I remember training teachers in my old high school. Why didn't I have a teacher of color? I did not see Black history. I did not see Black women's history, Islamic history, Persian history. I didn't see any elements of myself. All I saw was white history. And I said, "Shame!" There's only one word to describe that. Shame on us!

We can do better. Why are we not teaching children the fullness of diversity? And so what happens as an effect is students can be traumatized by deficit labels, even by invisibility, not seeing yourself. They can start to internalize that. And if all they see is at risk, at risk, struggling, that's who they can become.

[00:13:21] **Rafael Otto:** Right, it's the power of language and how we talk about each other and our young children.

[00:13:25] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Yes. And Toni Morrison would write about this power of language. That's what they start to see of themselves. And they may not see themselves as enough or good enough. I cannot fit in these spaces. And then, you know, they go out into the world and they carry that trauma and it affects their relationships.

It affects them just like anybody else who has trauma that has maybe been undealt with. But this is something that is different from other forms of trauma like loss, illness, divorce, you know, those sorts of things. A child should not have to experience this in schools or by teachers.

Because it is creating such a great deal of harm when we are perpetuating these types of labels and stereotypes.

[00:14:13] **Rafael Otto:** Unlike a trauma — like loss — this is something that we can prevent.

[00:14:18] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Sure. Absolutely. Every single day we can make that child feel like they are loved that they are beautiful, that they are genius, that they are enough. But they know when you see them as struggling and this and that. They know when you talk about them behind their backs and say that they can't read and write because that comes out. People call it implicit bias.

But that comes out in our practice. How you really feel about somebody will come out in your teaching, so you cannot hide it.

[00:14:48] **Rafael Otto:** Right. And that brings me to the role of the teacher and the education of our students, of young people and how important the role of the teacher is. So maybe talk about some of the challenges that teachers experience. You know, I know it's very common for some classrooms can be more culturally and linguistically diverse and teachers can often be coming from more dominant culture backgrounds that creates a dynamic. But teachers have a responsibility in this context.

Talk about what some of the challenges are to alleviate that, and what teachers can be doing.

[00:15:24] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Well, I think teachers have to first identify what's a challenge. That's a beautiful opportunity having diverse students that are different than yours. Look at all the diversity, all the knowledge that you're going to learn as you're being paid. So that is a beautiful opportunity. So I first think we have to figure out the word "challenge". Is it just the challenge for me? Is it a challenge or am I making it a challenge? Right?

Is there something I can do to lift what I'm perceiving as a challenge. First of all, there's no job like the teacher, nobody has it. Nobody has a job where so many circumstances can impact five minutes of instruction. Circumstances that you don't have control over. The home, the community, the church, the synagogue, the masjid, the community center, the neighborhood, walking to school, society, social media, TikTok. All of these outside external forces impacts that one child and that one learning experience.

But now you have like, thirty children. And you have multiple identities, you have multiple experiences, multiple histories, and you may not have had all the preparation. I don't think a teacher education program can fully prepare you at all. I mean, it can certainly prepare us better. We have a unique stance and the system is built to give teachers a curriculum and teach it, and sometimes have pacing guides, and be all on this page at the same time.

That does not work. That's not going to work given the diversity and all those external factors. Teachers need to see themselves as artists, as someone who's creating stories to teach and tell beautiful stories, truthful stories, historical stories, connective stories, connective curriculum to

the real world. And so when you have those challenges, we have to strengthen our profession as pedagogues.

Practice, practice. I remember my first years as a teacher, I practiced. I was up, I invested that time to be the best, because I did not have time to be in a training period. The children needed the most excellent form of a teacher tomorrow.

And so I had to play catch up on all the things that no one taught me. I did not wait for or rely on. I did not rely on my principal to send me to a PD or to a conference. I did not wait for somebody to say, "Now I'm going to give you an instructional course on who Latinx children are." No, I'm a seeker of knowledge!

I studied, I researched, I talked to the children. I did not sit in that comfortable pool of struggle. Because some teachers and leaders can be like armchair revolutionaries. *Yeah. We need change. We need change.* But then they don't do anything. It's uncomfortable to study, to read an extra book, perhaps for some people. But that's where the growth happens.

So teachers who are experiencing those challenges, trust me, we have enough genius in this country and the world to seek truth and knowledge on how to be a better teacher. We have podcasts, we have videos, we have professional books, we have people you can email. So it is really no excuse. And then we have to show up and just do our best and most excellent.

We're not going to eliminate racism in society. We're not going to in one lesson plan, do this or that because there are so many of those external forces. We're not going to stop TikTok. So I'm saying all that to say is that teachers also need to give themselves grace. Once you show up in your most excellent form. Okay, I did well and I'm going to try again tomorrow and be better and better and better. I'm going to go home and rest and drink water and be better, you know, because this is still a job. I know it's like a calling, but it's still a job and we still have to take care of ourselves. So it's a little bit on both of those sides.

[00:19:28] **Rafael Otto:** What about this question of, because I know teachers want to take what you're writing about, take this information. They want to bring it into the classrooms. And sometimes they feel bound by the curriculum that their district is using, that their school is using. And so there's a tension there. Do you have a recommendation for teachers who want to move a little bit faster with what you're teaching and might not feel like they can?

[00:19:55] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Yeah so... we don't have to be confined by the curriculum. The curriculum is asking typically for one fifth of the pursuits of our ancestors. We are still giving the curriculum, but we are going above and beyond. Not too many principals have a problem with teachers going from 20% to a hundred percent.

And so we have to reframe it. The curriculum is giving students 20%. I am suggesting a hundred percent. Who wants 20%? If you want me to teach 20% of the curriculum and you're mandating just the 20%, teachers have to say to themselves, "Is this the right place to nurture my own genius?" because that teacher might feel so intellectually confined that you might want to run

out of that building screaming. We don't want that. All of the lesson plan examples that I typically show, they all come from the curriculum.

I'll give you an example. There was a math teacher in New York who wanted to teach about students finding a percentage of a number in sixth grade. And the textbook had like, word problems, worksheets, and she taught all that. But she put it in the context of video games and gaming.

They studied, for identity, their ability to create games, and their own gaming identity, and studied the identities of gamers. What do gamers do? How do they read, write, think, and move in the world? For intellect, they studied the history of video games in math class. It was just like a short excerpt they read. They learned about how video games changed over time. The prices, revenue, how much gamers make. So it was very mathematical thinking. For criticality, they looked at the disproportionality of gamers in terms of gender and race and salaries. And then for joy, they had to make a game, and create it and present it to their class.

Now, that teacher is still teaching the sanctioned school, the mandated adopted school curriculum. But just modified it a bit, and added some more texts to make sure students are more engaged. So if a principal is against this kind of teaching completely, and superintendents, and things like that. If they're against us being more excellent, then that might not be the place for you. Or you're going to have to find ways to cope with that because I've been in those buildings before.

[00:22:26] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah, I appreciate that. I want to go back a little bit when we were talking about culturally and historically responsive classrooms and school communities. Just describe what those are going to look like increasingly. What is sort of the ideal classroom community through that lens? What does that look like?

[00:22:47] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Well, it starts at so many different levels. From the US DOE, Department of Education. But if we're just talking about a district level. You know, the school board, the superintendent knows how to speak about equity, anti-racism, and culturally and historically responsiveness. They know how to... especially the superintendent, knows what it looks like in pedagogy, can even write a lesson plan on it.

And I'm only describing the superintendents that I've worked with, where this has worked, where they have adopted it. This is what happens. It's not a secret of what we're doing. So many people feel like, "Oh, I have to sneak and teach in this way." But everyone feels committed to this work in their mind and their heart on the leadership level.

And then principals are trained. I have principals writing lesson plans and teaching, because if you're going to lead teachers, you have to experience a teacher. You cannot be out of the classroom for 10 years. It can be twice a year. At least principals need to volunteer teach into any teacher's class. I'm sure any teacher will be more than happy to have them in their class for that hour.

[00:23:58] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:23:59] **Gholdy Muhammad:** And then they practice. They write and get feedback on their lesson plans or refine an existing unit plan, and they have some time with it. And then these culturally and historically- responsive schools, their mission statement reflects the five pursuits.

So even in their language of their mission or their vision, we're looking for joy and criticality and intellect and the importance of academic success and identity. And they run their staff meetings. The principals I work with, I teach them, this is how you lead a staff meeting. That's reflective of these five pursuits.

If a teacher comes to your staff meeting and does not feel a sense of joy, or does not leave knowing a little bit more about themselves, we did not hit the mark there. And then we look at interview questions, hiring new teachers, observations, evaluations. See, it has to feel like a culture. Like this is how we do things.

If not, it's going to feel like, *oh, this is the instruction over here. And this is culturally, historically responsiveness over here.* Every once in a while, we'll put a band-aid and pretend like we're really doing it. It's not authentic. It's not steeped within the fabric of the community.

And then teachers are then trained to do this work, and students are a part of the process the whole time. So many times I go into meetings to figure out problems, solutions, data, curriculum. There are no youth.

[00:25:30] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:25:31] **Gholdy Muhammad:** I said, "How are we going to make a decision on curriculum when we don't even involve them?" We don't get their input.

So children have to be a part of this. And then all of the teachers' unit plans will eventually be within these five pursuits. And then we start to see change, personal change, academic change, classroom engagement. We start to see a lot of teachers restoring their vigor and their energy to teach. Teachers did not become teachers to just read a script and to test prep. They became a teacher to, you know, do something creative. And those teachers who are doing that already, we see a different kind of classroom.

[00:26:10] **Rafael Otto:** And this idea of involving children and students. It's... we're not just talking about high school students. We're talking about kids of all ages, right? There's that opportunity for children of all ages in the education world to be involved in what their education looks like.

[00:26:25] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Absolutely. And we would see that in literary societies. Members were like, adolescent children. It wasn't this hierarchy. *Oh! You're older, you know more, you're my teacher...* No! Everybody was the teacher and everyone was a student. You can be in a classroom, and I do this in the summers, I have classrooms of like a 17-year-old with a 12-year-old.

[00:26:48] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:26:49] **Gholdy Muhammad:** And when you look at what they produce and create and write, and then you put my writing with it, you don't know who has the PhD. Who's 17 and who's 12. You wouldn't be able to guess. That's how brilliant it is.

[00:27:02] **Rafael Otto:** Okay. I've one more question for you. And I was reading some of the comments about your book, and people talk about this as a glimpse into the future. That literacy is a force for equity. That what you're writing about here can help undo racial injustice. Did you have that in mind when you set out to write the book? And how do you feel about those as the future of this work?

[00:27:28] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Everything I do I have goals of dismantling racism. I have always had that in dismantling other forms of oppression, too. And making the world a better place. Everything I do, I try to have that. I knew that the book was special. It felt special to me. I knew that the model was special, and teachers would tell me before the book was published, that is something special here.

I don't know if we can ever anticipate like, the beautiful and unique ways people have taken up the book in such mass numbers. The book really took off during a time where the world was shut down. We saw empty streets and we were all afraid, and in a pandemic, and more racial violence was happening.

So all this stuff was happening and then the book... people were like, "Yeah! This book is helping to teach more equity in classrooms, more anti-racism." So I certainly hope that it is useful for educators to help them dismantle racism in the classroom for sure. Racism in general. But I also hope that these external forces that I mentioned, the businesses, the religious institutions, government policy, all these things, social media, like we all need models of justice.

I've been invited, recently, to be on a panel with some artists and developers at Google and some musical recording artists, Pharrell Williams. And AdColor is a DEI: Diversity Equity and Inclusion space that looks at it in different realms. That's important. It should not just be educators doing this work, but every profession, everyone. And, you know, I started talking to a doctor to look at this model. What it means for healthcare, and how we feel safe and comfortable in that doctor's office, and if we really know our treatments. If we question, if we critique, if we feel like justice is being served in healthcare. And I don't know if I may have anticipated all of that but like I said, I knew it was special and I'm enjoying seeing how people are using it to frame their thinking in multiple spaces in addition to education.

[00:29:50] **Rafael Otto:** Well, thank you for your work with educators all over the country. I know you're working with people across the United States and I think internationally as well. It's been wonderful to have you on the podcast today, Gholdy. Thank you so much.

[00:30:02] **Gholdy Muhammad:** Thank you so much. Thank you for having me.