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# Critical Community Conversations: Cultivating the Elusive Dialogue About Racism With Parents, Community Members, and Teachers

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# Critical Community Conversations: Cultivating the Elusive Dialogue About Racism With Parents, Community Members, and Teachers

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## **Abstract**

*This article highlights how two researchers started Critical Community Conversations (CCC) with a school community in an effort to learn from one another and build solidarity. The intent was for CCC to focus on some of the most pressing issues facing our nation, state, and local neighborhoods, with a special lens on racism.*

**Key words:** *community dialogue, race, racism, social justice, urban education, Whiteness.*

On the night Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. won the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, Atlanta's self-professed progressive community organized an in-town, interracial, and interdenominational dinner to honor him. Atlanta was in the process of reinventing itself as "A City Too Busy To Hate," suggesting a slogan could undo centuries of racial violence. The mayor of Atlanta at the time, Ivan Allen Jr., asked Coca-Cola's former president, Robert Woodruff, and president, Paul Austin, to urge their fellow businessmen to attend the dinner because Allen's invitations were largely ignored. Woodruff and Austin spoke to their peers and the dinner was eventually sold out. The event is retold as a marker of Atlanta's racial harmony. Reports from that night referred to an impromptu singing of "We Shall Overcome" by attendees. That was 1965 and Atlanta's racial harmony is as elusive now as

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## *Love and Muhammad*

1 it was then. One hollow event cannot produce racial unity. The idea of mass racial harmony  
2 is an elusive idea in and of itself. As we write this article, in the midst of trying to digest the  
3 implications of the presidency of Donald J. Trump, the idea of mass racial harmony seems  
4 unattainable and, if we are being honest, it is. Therefore, we entered this work with a clear  
5 understanding of how racist ideas function in the United States, with particular attention to  
6 schools. We view America and its policies as anti-Black. We accept that schools are spaces of  
7 Whiteness, White rage, and disempowerment for students of color.

## *Knowing What We Know*

10 Community organizing is not a new concept. Historically, people in urban communi-  
11 ties have come together to work toward similar ends, namely discussing the sociopolitical  
12 context, pushing back against oppression, and, ultimately, advancing educational progress  
13 for young people in schools (McHenry, 2002; Muhammad, 2015). From the 19th century  
14 onward U.S. communities, specifically communities of color, have organized to respond to  
15 racial hostility and racial violence. These conditions, especially in southern states, restrict-  
16 ed Black people from formal education. Because people of color had limited rights within  
17 many social, political, and educational institutions, they had to rely on themselves to create  
18 and sustain their own organizations and spaces for learning, which included developing  
19 ways to educate their young people. Rather than waiting for those with legislative power  
20 to grant their rights and education, they instead created their own agendas and spaces,  
21 and claimed authority by organizing community meetings. Together, community mem-  
22 bers, parents, and educators drew upon individual and collective strengths for organiza-  
23 tion and action. Thus, the development of CCC stemmed from this historical practice and  
24 represents a return to the richness of our past. The aim of CCC is to start a dialogue with  
25 a school community in an effort to learn from one another and build solidarity. For these  
26 conversations to be productive for everyone, we stress that listening, reflecting, and creat-  
27 ing a safe sharing environment is crucial to the progress of community building for a better  
28 and just tomorrow. The intent is for CCC to focus on some of the most pressing issues fac-  
29 ing our nation, state, and local neighborhoods. In that way, CCC continues the traditions  
30 held in urban and rural communities of centering the needs of the child by discussing  
31 political issues of race and racism affecting its members.

## *Many Rivers to Cross*

34 In late October 2016, right before the U.S. general election, approximately 75 parents,  
35 teachers, school leaders, and community members gathered for free food (and childcare)  
36 in order to engage in a group dialogue about race and racism in America. We were the  
37 facilitators for the dialogue. Instead of providing a play-by-play of the activities of the  
38 night, we would like to use the short space we have to discuss the overall goals of CCC by  
39 outlining three crucial points. We feel these are necessary in general for cultivating ongo-  
40 ing conversations for future community gatherings and may serve as a gauge for others to  
41 create similar spaces in their communities.

- 43 1. **The conversation must be historicized.** Schools and education cannot be under-  
44 stood in a solely contemporary mindset. Racism is systemic and found in educa-  
45 tional institutions, curricula, teaching practices, and policy. During our meeting,  
46 we found that history threaded its way through all the critical conversations about

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racism. For example, the group discussed gentrification in the local community and ways in which the public media has been saturated with negative depictions of urban youths and communities. Thus, the history of race as a social construct, the history of racism, and the histories of these communities must be deeply researched, discussed, and understood before having conversations about teaching and learning in schools.

2. **The conversation must be intersectional.** School progress and achievement cannot be understood merely by discussing practices within classrooms. The critical conversations in our meeting were intersectional: Community members talked about the social, sociocultural, economical, and political patterns of society and how these areas have dictated the wider context of schooling. They discussed problems of gentrification, social agendas of politicians, and the physical, spiritual, and academic lynching of children (Love, 2014, 2016).
3. **The conversation must disrupt colonized thinking.** Colonization is not a thing of the past. It is a current form of violence that has saturated our schools, communities, and way of thinking. We see modern-day iterations in the ways in which people of color are represented in mainstream media and Black people are forced out of their communities.

### *From Critical Conversations to Critical Action*

As community members, educators, and critical scholars we understand the urgent necessity of this work. While CCC continues the legacies of organized social activism, we are also mindful that social conditions of history have bred racism that continues to this day. Thus, community members must talk to one another in order to build truth and criticality. This work comes with difficulty. Talking about race and racism among people of diverse histories and identities can be challenging and uncomfortable for some who do not have to experience racism daily; yet it is at this point where we begin to advance in knowledge, understanding, and practices. To cultivate conversations that are both engaging and productive, communities must ask themselves:

- Who needs to be in the conversation?
- What is the sociopolitical climate of the community and school?
- What resources can community members draw on to support the conversations?
- How can critical conversations result in action?

We do not pretend to have all the answers. At times, the conversations seemed to move in directions that upheld Whiteness and respectability politics and were flat-out discriminatory. We were emotionally challenged as facilitators to listen to someone in our community—a Black woman, no less—say and firmly believe in White superiority in decision making. As a facilitator in a moment like that, it is important to find the words to discuss the effects of Whiteness without losing your temper. Your words should become extremely intentional, as you want everyone in the room to understand how to challenge that viewpoint even when a Black person makes those remarks. As two Black female facilitators, we had to be mindful as to how our identities and past traumas shape the work we do. There are no easy answers, but we have to engage and know the limitations of that engagement.

## *Love and Muhammad*

1 We are currently planning our next CCC, where we will screen the documentary *13th*.  
2 The film, directed by Ava DuVernay, connects the dots with great detail between mass  
3 incarceration, prison-industrial complexes, politics (southern strategy), and slavery, which  
4 are all institutions fueled by racism. The film does a brilliant job of highlighting how capi-  
5 talism is anchored in racism and how slavery—or the system that will ensure Black people  
6 are Whites' permanent property—is a pillar of White supremacy. After the viewing, we  
7 plan to discuss the film in small and large groups. We hope this film will help our commu-  
8 nity members understand how permanent racism is in the United States and why the fight  
9 continues. CCC is just one example of how to strengthen our connections in the hopes of  
10 crafting an agenda that pursues justice and equity for all.

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