



## GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

# Culturally Responsive Practices in SEED Grantee Work

BY AMY LAMITIE

Georgia State University and UnboundEd are two Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grantees committed to building educator capacity to implement and support culturally responsive practices. Each grantee has designed a grant strategy rooted in the belief that to advance equity and inclusion, especially for students of color, they first had to address how unchecked bias is reflected in the mindset, language, and practices of educators and the structures of schools. Georgia State University approaches this work through its teacher residency model by creating critically conscious, compassionate, and skilled teacher candidates, while UnboundEd is in the early stages of building leadership capacity to support environments conducive to increasing culturally responsive practices and to supporting a positive math identity in students of color.

Gloria Ladson-Billings introduced the term culturally relevant pedagogy more than two decades ago and used it to describe a form of teaching that calls for engaging learners whose experiences and cultures are traditionally excluded from mainstream settings. Geneva Gay built on this work by developing a framework—culturally responsive teaching—that focused more strongly on teaching strategies and practices and emphasized “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.”<sup>1</sup> In 2017, Django Paris expanded the work even further by advancing a vision of culturally sustaining pedagogy, positing that culturally sustaining educators help students develop a positive cultural identity while teaching school subjects such as math, reading, and civics. While these three pedagogies are not identical, all share a common goal: defy the deficit model and ensure students see themselves and their communities reflect and valued in the content taught in school.

This spotlight explores why culturally responsive practices are important in educational settings and the impact they have on educators and students. It offers several insights into how culturally responsive practices help to advance equity and inclusion in all EED grants:

- Shifting mindsets
- Matching practices with contexts
- Transforming students and educators

***“I want to underscore that this isn’t a fad or trend. I feel confident that our research is showing these are best practices because this shift in methods is really impactful and beneficial.”***

**Maya Jenkins**

Instructional mentor with Georgia State University’s CREATE



### What is the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant program?

The purpose of the US Department of Education’s SEED program is to increase the number of highly effective educators serving concentrations of high-need students by supporting the implementation of evidence-based practices that prepare, develop, or enhance the skills of educators. These grants allow eligible applicants to develop, expand, and evaluate practices that can serve as models to be sustained and disseminated.

1. Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010), 31.

# Meet the Grantees

## Georgia State University



**Rhina Fernandes Williams**

Ph.D., Associate Clinical Professor,  
Critical and Multicultural Education



**Maya Jenkins**

Instructional Mentor



**Elizabeth Hearn**

Ed.S, Program Director and Principal  
Co-Investigator

Georgia State University (GSU) has been growing its teacher-residency program since 2011, when GSU's College of Education and Human Development first partnered with Atlanta Neighborhood Charter School. Work was sustained through an Investing in Innovation (i3) grant from the US Department of Education and continues with support from a 2017 SEED grant. The grant program – Collaboration and Reflection Enhancing Atlanta Teacher Effectiveness (CREATE) – is entering its last

year of 2017 funding. GSU has also secured a new 2020 SEED grant to support the work. The program merges an evidence-based teacher residency model with increased opportunities for collaboration, reflection, and transformation for all educators, including principals, in CREATE consortium K-8 schools. The 3-year curriculum to train residents focuses on developing their cultural competency in teaching along with their capacity to develop personalized, responsive curriculum for high-need students.

## UnboundEd



**Sharone Brinkley-Parker**

Vice President, Research,  
Strategy and Evaluation

UnboundEd, a 2020 grantee, is an education nonprofit organization comprised of former classroom teachers, curriculum writers, school leaders, and education experts. Founded in 2015, its vision is education systems that *disrupt systemic racism by providing students of color meaningful, engaging, and affirming grade-level instruction™*. UnboundEd's Math Identity Leadership Accelerator™ (MILA) SEED initiative aims to implement professional learning modules and support structures that develop principals' understanding of math problem-solving strategies and culturally responsive pedagogy and to support those principals to grow the capacity of their math teachers. UnboundEd partners with districts and state agencies across the country in pursuit of culturally responsive education. Specific to this initiative, UnboundEd works with Tulsa Public Schools and Guilford County Public Schools, to name a few. Sharone Brinkley-Parker recently joined UnboundEd and directs SEED grant work.

# SHIFTING MINDSETS

## Georgia State University

Elizabeth Hearn described some of the harmful educator mindsets about students and families she has witnessed over time and explained how the language used to describe students in Title 1 schools in particular revealed unchecked bias and bigotry against not only those students and families of color but also against indigenous people and gender nonconforming people. She explained, “We heard a lot about students in these schools as ‘high risk’ and ‘high needs.’ The words focused on problems, but these students are also aspiring scholars, athletes, and joyful, bright human beings, and the language isn’t reflecting that.”

Rhina Fernandes Williams illustrated the impact of this mindset on teacher residents: “Our candidates were getting socialized right away, and it wasn’t around equity and justice or around centering teaching on children.” Instead, there was an emphasis on compliance and behavior management practices that likely contributed to, she posited, the school-to-prison pipeline. She added, “There was a whole other thing happening in the field – a ‘that’s just how we do it’ sentiment and a ‘there’s not room for this’ mentality.”

This is why, Hearn explained, the program works a great deal with teacher candidates to develop an understanding of the need for them to be justice-orientated educators when they see injustices: who should they talk to, when, how, and why? To do this well, she noted, they need to learn to manage their own stress and to build wellness within themselves to be able to deal with the emotions they are experiencing as a result of their work.

Maya Jenkins further explained how GSU’s decision to build teacher residents’ capacity with culturally responsive practices helps to shift new teachers away from deficit thinking and push them to look at their classrooms through their students’ eyes and to look for their students’ strengths. She noted,

**“Students are more engaged when educators intentionally infuse their cultural references into all aspects of instruction. Ownership of learning is constructed when teachers step outside of the relationship of teacher-as-all-knowing and student as passive receptacle.”**

## UnboundEd

When Sharone Brinkley-Parker was a math educator, she taught in the same urban school system she attended and discovered that the concept of tracking was still alive and students of color were not given access to advanced math courses because of the tracking system. She witnessed how the belief of an adult can create barriers for a student and the ways in which adults’ beliefs about certain students resulted in those students being cut off from even the choice of pursuing a career in STEM fields.

She explained, “I realized we were punishing kids for being disadvantaged. Later on as a parent, I also noticed that the explicit link of science and math created an all-or-nothing approach to advanced mathematics: students either had to choose both or the master schedule couldn’t accommodate them. While I was able to navigate this on behalf of my daughter, I wondered about the parents who don’t have the systems knowledge or the fortitude to push back.”

UnboundEd’s MILA program work helps build school leaders’ capacity to use school structures to promote culturally responsive practices in mathematics with the idea that implementation of those structural improvements leads to increased awareness and creates more responsive classrooms. Brinkley-Parker explained, “Right now, we’re beginning to prompt leaders to disrupt systemic racist practices in math programs and classrooms by teaching them how to observe math instruction and coach math teachers using culturally responsive tools to improve structures for equitable math instruction to be offered.”

UnboundEd’s MILA program is also in the preliminary stages of developing school leader understandings of identity formation within math. This is done through the development of structures in which leaders coach and observe teachers and collaborate with leadership team members through culturally relevant discourse and readings. They build professional learning communities in which there is intentionality behind what is said and there is validation of multiple perspectives when discussing mathematics experiences. “These are structures that lead to sustainability over time and are about adaptive leadership just as much as the technical fixes that need to be made,” Brinkley-Parker explained.

# MATCHING PRACTICES WITH CONTEXTS

## Georgia State University

Elizabeth Hearn recognized, “We are aware we’re a public university partnering with a majority-black school district in an urban setting in the southern United States.” She was then quick to explain, “So we make sure not to walk into APS schools and say we know the answer; instead, we include professors, teacher candidates, school leaders, and human resource and professional learning district staff to conduct hands-on collaborative planning. And all of this is context-specific.”

Strategic planning, collaboration, and trial and error moved GSU to design CREATE to offer a unique approach to advancing equity and inclusion in the Atlanta Public Schools. The program design was informed, in part, by the high rates of teacher attrition in APS, particularly among black teachers in Title I schools. GSU recognized the district’s efforts to navigate limited state and federal funding for teacher supports and mentoring. They realized that one of their solutions – using first-year teachers, many of whom are less skilled and often teaching outside of their certification areas – worked to further exacerbate low student outcomes and high teacher burnout. To combat these unintended outcomes, CREATE developed a 3-year curriculum to develop residents’ cultural competency in teaching; their capacity to develop personalized, responsive curriculum for high-need students; and a strengthened mindset to prioritize resiliency to thrive during the first years of teaching.

Rhina Fernandes-Williams further explained that the program emphasizes the practice of mindfulness because they understand that doing this work is hard. She stated,

**“We have to take care of ourselves and know what’s going on inside ourselves while we’re doing this work of moving away from being okay with the harm that is being done to students. Mindfulness is not about learning to tolerate what is wrong: I don’t want to teach teachers or children to take deep breaths while the system is harming them.”**

## UnboundEd

Organizationally, UnboundEd asserts that culturally responsive practices are necessary to advance learning and engagement for students of color. UnboundEd’s MILA program drives a school-leader development model predicated on an interest in developing leaders who can grow their own staff.

Brinkley-Parker explained, “To grow their staff they have to grow themselves. Leaders need to understand the significance so they can ensure the application within classrooms and the relevance based on what students need. We all have different cultural understandings which undergird the ways in which we see things and what we expect of others; this is our bias showing up.” She explained,

**“Because we all have bias, leaders have to understand that where they are as individuals coming into the system is only their starting point, and to ask themselves how they can create room to learn and grow.”**

In the context of UnboundEd’s grant work, culturally responsive practices prioritize providing students of color with grade-level instruction that is engaging, affirming, and meaningful. This means that student tasks and texts are aligned to what’s appropriate to being college and career ready. Brinkley-Parker further explained, “When we say affirming, we mean that we take into consideration how ethnicity, race, and linguistics play roles in making meaningful experiences for students. Culturally responsive practices, especially in mathematics, emphasize problem-solving strategies, discourse, and positive classroom relationships.”



# IMPACT AND TRANSFORMATION

## Student Outcomes

Maya Jenkins explained the impact that culturally responsive teaching has on teachers and students by characterizing the way in which it fosters independent learners. It does this by prioritizing the development of critical thinking skills and an overall academic mindset. “Students are more engaged when educators intentionally infuse their culture references into all aspects of instruction,” she stated.

Elizabeth Hearn further described the ways in which culturally responsive practices push back against language and mindsets that are oppressive to groups of people. She explained that these practices encourage students to resist dominant narratives, to not automatically believe what society tells them about themselves, to come to understand that something someone wrote isn’t necessarily true.

“They also encourage students to actively acknowledge who they are, to come to understand themselves, and to witness representations of oppressed peoples that tell stories of beauty, success, brilliance, and joy,” she added.

“When done the right way, it’s not only empowering but also transformative,” noted Jenkins.

## Mentor Teachers

Elizabeth Hearn acknowledged GSU’s initial surprise at how critical the mentor teacher is in this work. She explained,

“The mindset of the mentor teacher will make or break a student teacher. We would be wise to invest a huge amount of effort to find the right people to do the job well and not leave it up to chance. Find people who are open to being compassionate and equity-centered, pay them, develop them, and embrace them. Without skilled mentor teachers everything breaks down.”

As a result, GSU created a new position in the program to examine the curriculum for mentor teachers related to cultural responsiveness. Hearn noted, “Our mentor teachers are experiencing high rates of understanding about why they need to be active, justice-oriented educators, and many understand how to do this work as well.”

Maya Jenkins told how GSU also discovered that mentor teachers thrive when they are learning, too. She explained, “We assumed at first they were focused on mentoring and leading, and now we see how much they want to learn and grow and how purpose-driven they are.”

Rhina Fernandes-Williams also noted that in addition to mentor teachers, this work excites other educators in schools, so that figuring out how to get those individuals involved is important as well.

## Resident Teachers

Some of the impacts of GSU’s work are being explicitly measured, such as the percentage of teachers who are committed to staying in teaching. Six years into this program, 96% of black teachers are staying compared to 70% nationally. Hearn added that GSU’s teacher candidates self-report greater skill levels in stress management, empathy, and resilience and that black teacher candidates graduate GSU at statistically higher rates. They also remain committed to remain as teachers two years into their jobs at significantly higher levels.

The program also measures teacher candidates’ levels of compassion using a validated scale that considers factors related to burnout and empathy. Jenkins explained how resilience is linked to compassion, and that compassion is “empathy plus the urge to do something about it.”

She further explained how increased levels of compassion in mentor teachers and teacher candidates directly relates to students, who benefit from having a safe place to communicate their emotions, have difficult conversations, and advocate for themselves. She further acknowledged that GSU teacher candidates leave with a network and a support system, which is especially critical at the beginning of a teacher’s career.

## School Building Leader Outcomes

Fernandes-Williams also observed that when this work is supported by school district and school building leaders across a district, it becomes even more powerful, which supports UnboundEd’s approach to the work through school leaders.

To illustrate this point further, Elizabeth Hearn noted,

“This work is the opposite of ‘one and done.’ It’s a deep shift in practice and approach. As we build out a wider circle, the shift deepens and has longer lasting impacts. Imagine, for example, the impact and scope of influence when a superintendent learns critically reflective compassion practices.”

Sharone Brinkley-Parker acknowledged that UnboundEd only started MILA program implementation in mid-April 2021. However, she noted, “What we are seeing so far is that the learning experiences are causing leaders to think about structures that may not have been elevated when focusing on instruction, such as how the school day is set up, who is standing in front of students, how they are balancing day-to-day management concerns with a focus on culturally responsive academic impact. Our program supports leaders in seeing how we have been operating in a fundamentally inequitable system and the critical importance of implementing culturally relevant instruction in math using the knowledge and skills to face this unfair system and combat it.”

# Closing

The work of GSU and UnboundEd holds promise not only to inform SEED grantee work, but also to clarify for all EED grantees the positive impact that enacting culturally responsive practices has for educators and students alike. And as the work of advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion evolves in educational settings across the nation, the potent role that culturally responsive practices plays is emerging as essential to sustaining lasting, meaningful change.

