

Melanin Magic: A Conversation about Black Joy Podcast Transcript

Jahiem Thomas (Host):

Hello everyone, welcome back to another episode of the Melanin Magic Podcast. This podcast is a part of the Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education SSHRC Connection Project. Today's topic is: what does Black joy mean to young people? And on today's episode, we have joining us...

Holidae Robinson:

Holidae Robinson and I currently attend Humber College.

Coleen Dudley:

Coleen Dudley. I work at TNG, the Toronto Neighbourhood Group.

Tiasia Robinson:

Tiasia Robinson and I currently attend Westview Centennial Secondary School.

Dr. Alana Butler:

Dr. Alana Butler. I'm an associate professor at Queen's University.

Dr. Janelle Brady:

Dr. Janelle Brady. I'm an assistant professor at TMU.

Jahiem Thomas (Host):

And I'm your host, Jahiem Thomas, a grade 12 student about to graduate high school. Okay, the first question we have for today is, what does Black joy mean to you? Start us off, Holidae.

Holidae Robinson:

Okay. Black joy to me is an act of resistance and empowerment. It's the ability to celebrate our culture, history, and achievements despite the systemic challenges that we all face. It's about reclaiming our happiness, finding strength in our community and thriving in spaces that weren't designed for us all. It's in the music we listen to, the traditions we carry, and the way we all uplift each other.

Coleen Dudley:

So piggybacking off of what Holidae said, Black joy means reclaiming our identity, especially in places where we feel most uncomfortable, and finding peace and happiness within those spaces. So until I can feel comfortable in the workspace with my natural hair, I don't think I will find true joy, but that's what I hope for. That's what Black joy means to me.

Tiasia Robinson:

Following up on what Coleen said, I think freedom is Black joy. The ability to feel, enjoy, love, create, live freely, completely exist, and define happiness according to our own standards. Black joy is a celebration of Black life beyond hardship and suffering, and it is both individual and community. It serves as a reminder that Black life is full, rich, and deserving of peace, love, and joy. It's an act of resistance and self care, a refusal to let trauma be the sole driving factor.

Jahiem Thomas (Host):

So for our second question of today, in the face of historical and systemic barriers, how does Black joy serve as a catalyst for resistance, thriving, and transformational change?

Coleen Dudley:

So I believe that it serves as a catalyst by creating mental resilience. So what that looks like for me is strong parents create stronger children. So like, generational influence and intelligence, you're going to teach your kids to be stronger and more resilient and learn the lessons that you did so they don't have to go through the same things you did. So it's transforming and creating change in the face of adversity. So, giving your child a little step or push forward that they weren't necessarily born with, quote, unquote.

Dr. Janelle Brady:

For me, I think about some of the meetings I've been in where we're looking at anti-Black racism in systems and institutions, and I think about the joy and the laughter that we have as Black folks coming together at the table, even when we're dealing with very complex and difficult topics and issues. I think about that laughter in the room in so many tables that I've been at. And I think that's part of the historical, in spite of historical and systemic barriers that we face as Black communities and Black individuals.

I also think of the historical pieces around looking at Black individuals all over the world, like all over the globe. If you look at folks in Trinidad and Tobago celebrating Carnival as an act of resistance, if you look at folks in Brazil and Bahia celebrating and thriving

around their Black ancestry and African heritage, and if you look at some of the African religious practices that have been been kind of shunned through the process of colonization, and you think about the ways that these practices have manifested across the world, across the globe, it's really what unites a lot of Black individuals around this idea of resistance through joy and joyful practices.

Holidae Robinson:

Honestly, you guys couldn't have said it any better. Black joy, to me, is a form of defiance. When we take up space, celebrate our culture, and succeed despite the odds, we challenge the narrative designed to oppress us. Joy fuels our activism. It's why we, at my school, we fought for our BSA [Black Student Alliance] and we hosted our first Black History Month assemblies within our school, and we spoke at multiple conferences like the Black Brilliance Conference.

When we focus on joy, by hosting all of these events or just showing our culture and who we are, we shift from just surviving to thriving. It shows younger generations that our existence isn't about the struggle. It's about excellence, culture, and community.

Dr. Alana Butler:

Okay, just drawing on what Dr. Brady had to say, I think it's really important as a professor to foster an environment, like in our institutions, even as teachers or professors, it's so important to foster Black joy for our students and our youth. When I think Holidae talked about having student groups, and at my university, it's predominantly white, and so we have groups for Black students and also for racialized students. And it's so important for them to have those spaces of Black joy for them to be able to survive in those institutions and to be able to develop a lot of resilience through the community. So just as Holidae had to say, I think it's important for us to have those community opportunities so that we can thrive. I think it was very well said.

Jahiem Thomas (Host):

Those are some excellent points. How do you guys think Black joy shapes pedagogical practices that combat anti-Black racism and foster Black student flourishing?

Coleen Dudley:

So, what I hear this question asking me is, what educational practices do I see in today's world that help fight against racism or microaggressions that students may face? And I feel like some practices that definitely do help are affirming the identity of the students that are in the classroom. I feel like it's very important to acknowledge the students and to feel welcome as a student. I feel like a trusting relationship needs to be

built and that can go along the lines of adding an inclusive curriculum towards your classroom so that students feel they can express themselves and be heard without any backlash or anything like that.

Dr. Janelle Brady:

Yeah, I think building on what Coleen has mentioned, I think it really comes down to those practices, those inclusive practices in the classroom and just rethinking the classroom space. So I've had the privilege and honor to co-create, alongside my colleague, Dr. Rachel Berman, a new course called *Black Childhoods in Canada* that's offered to a lot of students who end up going into the teaching profession in the Early Childhood Studies program. And some of the practices that I bring into the course is joyful practices around music. So we start off the class with a theme song of the day and it usually has to do with the topic that we're taking up. For instance, last week we were looking at ballroom culture amongst Black queer activists and Black queer community members and what that means. So we listened to a lot of really nice house and ballroom type music, which was amazing. I think it comes down to those everyday practices that you built into the spaces.

And I'm also thinking about what Coleen had mentioned earlier about the resistance strategies that are passed down from our parents, from Black mothers, to children, from generation to generation, for survival, but also for joy. So for me, what that looks like are lessons on navigating systems like how to hold your head high, and how to speak your mind, and how to be proud, and how to wear your hair in a way that you're proud of, for example, picking up on what Coleen had mentioned earlier. But it also are those joyful practices around, you know, five-year-old me being thrown in the middle of the living room in a circle with a lot of my aunties, my mom, their friends, and just doing little wines and doing little dances and doing dances that were in at the time, like the Butterfly and things like that and being encouraged. And thankfully there weren't recorders at the time, or phones, cell phones to record me. But these are some of the Black joyful practices that are kind of embedded in everyday and definitely passed down and taught as lessons, if we think of pedagogy as those lessons in teaching as well.

Dr. Alana Butler:

Dr. Brady, I really loved what you had to say. As a professor myself, I think it's really important to focus on the curriculum. I think that's one of the key ways we can bring joy into the classroom. Showing the students Black scholars. Like, when you look at your textbook, who are the people who have done amazing things? I love to bring those into the classroom and to see sometimes, even if you have, in my case, it's sometimes where you have one Black student in the class who will come up to you and say, oh, it's

so great that you're looking at Gloria Ladson Billings or Professor George Dei or Dr. Janelle Brady and her work.

So I think that's a big piece too, is students seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum brings them joy within itself. And I think that that's something that I'm very, very intentional when I teach. That I do. So I'm excited that, Janelle, that there's a course that you teach, that you have that course. And I love the way you talked about music too, because I think that's a big piece. So I think that's also something that we can think about. And I hope other educators, I'm in the Faculty of Education, so I'm hoping that future teachers will be able to listen to something like this and learn from that. So, thank you.

Jahiem Thomas (Host):

Okay, so what are some ways you guys feel that schools can move beyond just addressing barriers, and move towards actively fostering environments where Black students are able to thrive?

Holidae Robinson:

I believe that it's not enough to just acknowledge racism. Schools must create environments where Black students feel empowered. This means hiring more Black teachers and implementing mentorship programs that connect Black students with professionals who look like them. Making Black History Month a permanent part of their curriculum and not just a one month focus. I also believe that providing mental health resources that are culturally relevant to Black students is an important aspect to it. Schools should ask, what are we doing to ensure Black students feel seen, valued, and successful every single day?

Coleen Dudley:

I believe that schools can go beyond by implementing SEL [Social Emotional Learning]. As I mentioned at the beginning, I work for the Toronto Neighbourhood Group, so I've seen this work firsthand. SEL helps individuals manage emotions, set goals and build relationships. And I feel like that's really important, especially when a lot of Black youth have the stigma of being aggressive or different things like that. I feel like this can be integrated within the classroom, within different activities and discussions. This doesn't necessarily have to be a whole new course, but I feel like adding this to a curriculum would definitely help a Black student further themselves in life. Because there's a lot of things we don't know about ourselves and a lot of the things that we feel are normal and we don't know that, and having a place where we can talk about that would be very beneficial.

Dr. Alana Butler:

I think what Holidae had to say was really important because I was going to say, when I looked at this question, I thought, like, yeah, like hiring more Black teachers, like that representation is really important. But I also want to say too, how can schools in these environments reach out to Black families? So that's another piece too. I know Dr. Brady does work on Black parenting, Black mothering, and that's so important to do outreach in the schools to the community and meet them where they are and find out what the needs are for their children and how to support those children so that they can thrive. So I think having a school community piece, having more of a connection will help with Black thriving.

Tiasia Robinson:

Building on what Dr. Butler said, I also think that having a varied curriculum is insufficient. Teachers also need to actively support Black students through equitable, inclusive teaching, and overcome their prejudices. Educate educators in culturally sensitive anti-racist teaching methods, address unintentional prejudices in classroom expectations, discipline, and grading, center Black pleasure and brilliance, while implementing trauma informed teaching.

Jahiem Thomas (Host):

Okay, so now can you all share how your understanding of Black joy has evolved over time, and particularly as you've navigated different stages of your educational journey?

Holidae Robinson:

At first I thought Black joy was just about having fun and celebrating our culture. But through my journey, fighting for my school's BSA, organizing assemblies, speaking in front of TDSB trustees, I realized that Black joy is much deeper. It's about resilience, about creating spaces where we don't just exist, but thrive. Attending Black conferences and connecting with other Black students showed me that our joy is powerful. It's a force that drives change, builds community and challenges oppression. Today, I see Black joy as not just personal happiness, but a movement, one that ensures the next generation has more opportunities and representation than we did.

Coleen Dudley:

So as Holidae said, at first I saw it just as celebrating, like cultural achievements. So whether that be like BET awards, like a Super Bowl game, things like that, as I learned more, especially as I got to higher education, or as I got older, I realized it's also a powerful form of resistance against oppression. It's about, like, healing and

empowerment. So all these, like, Carnivals, like they were saying earlier about the different festivals in Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, it's all like a resistance. It's not necessarily just celebrating culture. It's like letting them know, we're here, like we're not going anywhere, like we're not afraid to be who we are. Different things like that.

Dr. Alana Butler:

At different stages. I had different feelings around Black joy. Like I think, like Holidae said, I kind of looked at it as celebrations, but I think now I see it more as like, building resilience through community, through community thriving and how important that is to build that. So I feel like whatever space we're in, if we can find ways to build that community. So I find like, Black joy for me comes from community. It comes from like my peers, it comes from, like, former students. It comes from, like, the spaces that I intentionally put myself in where I can experience that. So I want to just mention and kind of touch on what Holidae and Coleen so brilliantly just stated.

Tiasia Robinson:

For me, I noticed how Blackness was frequently portrayed through deficit-based narratives such as slavery, civil rights fights, and disparities, as I grew older and became more conscious of systemic racism in schooling. Despite the importance of those experiences, I came to understand that Black life is about thriving in spite of oppression, not just surviving it. Black joy evolved into a strategy for resistance. Enjoying works of art, music, and literature that praised Black life, retaliating against learning environments that misinterpreted or disregarded Black identity.

Dr. Janelle Brady:

And just building on what everyone said. I think, for me, like Black joy has evolved over time. I see myself in a similar spot as Holidae. When I was in high school, I led the Black student organization, and friends of mine and I, we put on our first Black History Month for the school. That hadn't happened in over a decade and that was a great achievement. We were very proud of it, but it shouldn't have happened. Just going back to what I believe Holidae mentioned earlier on, these practices should be institutionalized and it shouldn't just be one month. And it shouldn't really just rest on a number of students who are going above and beyond.

And at the time a lot of Black joy was around, I didn't realize, but that was the resistance work that I was a part of through community. And it was also about, like, fun activities like hair braiding day, dominoes, always doing some sort of dance, choreographing dances, culture days, and things like that. But I think it's evolved over time, my understanding of Black joy, because later on in university, it was largely around excellence. But I know there's a lot of conversations around Black excellence and what

that means, and are there opportunities for Black youth, Black children, Black families, Black community members to just be, and not to have to be like this superstar, doing everything and taking on it all, but to just be, and that for that to be enough. Right. And that could be a joyful practice as well. And it can be a practice of resistance, too.

Jahiem Thomas (Host):

So for me, personally, growing up as a Black youth in downtown Toronto, I went to a predominantly white elementary school with only about three Black kids who attended the school in my entire six years of being there, including myself. Usually I would have to rely on sports and playing sports to see some more familiar and friendly faces. But when I started to progress through middle school and high school, I feel I started to see more and more friendly faces, more Black people. I felt more included in things. I felt more, like, at home and comfortable going to school, especially now in high school, which I have about 40% of the school is, like, Black. So it's a big change.

But that's a wrap for this magical episode. Until next time, and thank you for listening.