

REPRESENTATION MATTERS, BUT WE CAN'T STOP THERE

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Nobody in my neighborhood had a college degree that I knew of, but I aspired to go to college because I admired a brilliant, Black girl from Chicago who had plans to attend Harvard. Her name was Laura Winslow, the bright teenage daughter from the 90's sitcom *Family Matters*. While Laura Winslow was obviously a fictional character, she felt real to me: I could see, hear, and understand her. She was an ambitious young girl from a lower middle-class family with dreams of furthering her education, and I could see myself in her.

While Laura Winslow's character provided an image of success to aspire to, her character's goal was an example of the necessary hard work, support, and challenges to gaining access and acceptance to a prestigious university. This depiction of a television character fostered my ability to take ownership and be proud of my Black girl identity and my goals of becoming a future mathematician. Fast forward to 2017, with the glowing success of the film *Hidden Figures* starring Taraji P. Henson as the late Katherine Johnson¹, I have witnessed the impact of representation on the TV and movie screen, igniting dreams for present and future Black science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) scholars in this country.

Although the Black community has had some positive media representations, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that only 78% of Black students graduated from public high schools in 2016-17 (NCES, 2019). The U.S. Department of Education reveals an additional concerning trend: of the Black students who did graduate that same year, only 7.6% of them went on to earn Bachelor's degrees in STEM fields (U.S. DOE, 2016). Now, if those statistics are coupled with images of Laura Winslow's and *Hidden Figures*—and are juxtaposed with viral videos of Black female students being assaulted in their math classroom, like a Black girl from Spring Valley High School being thrown from her desk by a resource officer²—then it makes school a complicated place for us. While I was moved to tears by a sense of pride when I saw my three-year-old niece dressed up as Dr. Mae Jemison, the first Black woman to travel into space, for character day at her elementary school, positive representation is interrupted by repeated acts of oppression against Black students. I want to make sure my niece and other Black girls are actually supported in becoming their full selves and imagining themselves as intellectuals in everyday spaces, including their classrooms.

Kudos to contemporary films that accurately position Black folks as scientists and innovators in STEM fields. And if the old adage, “seeing is believing” is true, then work needs to be done so that when people with minoritized identities are glorified on and off screen, their representations are an honest reflection of our reality. As teachers, administrators, and policymakers, our work cannot end with having a proverbial seat at the table: a seat at the table is simply not enough to combat the disproportionate injustices that systematically impact Black girls.

Allowing and making space for Black girls and women in STEM to live up to our potential by acknowledging and addressing structural impediments such as racism and sexism, can ensure a better future for all of STEM. Schools must invite STEM graduate students, PhDs, and professionals to speak with students, and dedicate time to touring local institutions and organizations such as Black Girls Code, the March for Black Women in STEM at Vanderbilt University, and the Women in Mathematics in New England conference at Smith College. In doing so, they will disrupt oppressive narratives that pigeonhole Black women and girls and

¹ Katherine Johnson was a pioneering Black mathematician who worked for NASA in the 1960s.

² Bullock, E. C. (2015). Do all lives matter in mathematics education?. Lansing: Michigan State University Program in Mathematics Education (PRIME) Colloquium, Michigan State University.

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further become an advocate for social justice. Representation matters, but we can't stop there. It is incumbent upon society to work toward inclusivity that humanizes Black girls and allows us to be seen and acknowledged as the beautiful, powerful, and resilient beings that we are.

References

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