

In the Face of Tragic Injustice: Reflections from Teach Plus Nevada Policy Fellows of Color

INTRODUCTION

George Floyd (Minneapolis, Minnesota), Tony McDade (Tallahassee, Florida), Breonna Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky), and Ahmaud Arbery (Brunswick, Georgia) are among the Black men and women tragically killed at the hands of police, sparking national and international protests. We remember them. We say their names. We honor their lives.

Black people make up 13% of the U.S. population, yet they accounted for [28% of the 1,066 people killed by police in 2020](#),¹ [27% of the 1,055 people killed by police in 2021](#),² and [25% of the 1,183 people killed by police in 2022](#).³ Black people will continue to be [“killed by police at higher rates than other groups”](#),⁴ until there is a change. There has to be a cultural shift from the mentality of punishing and policing of Black bodies to the protecting and honoring of Black communities. There is presently a systemic devaluation and dehumanization of *Blackness* that speaks of a legacy of racial injustice, discrimination, and racial violence in America and in our education system.

Our students, our children will continue to suffer police brutality. Tyre Nichols (Memphis, Tennessee), one of *our* students, one of *our* children, was severely beaten, critically injured at the hands of police. His name is written down as another police fatality. His life mattered. He mattered. He was a brother, a nephew, a father, and a son. His death, a mother’s most devastating nightmare. As Black parents, Black mothers, we do all that we can to protect our children, for fear that their very lives may be lost. “Many Black mothers worry that if they do not raise their children perfectly, along with teaching them how to maneuver inside and outside of Black spaces, [their children will never be safe](#). When [Black] mothers have concerns about having children because the depth of their melanin brings about fear, discrimination, inequity, and hatred, we have to step back and [examine] how America is failing Black mothers.”⁵

Many Black mothers worry if they do not raise their children perfectly, along with teaching them how to maneuver inside and outside of Black spaces, their children will never be safe. When [Black] mothers have concerns about having children because the depth of their melanin brings about fear, discrimination, inequity, and hatred, we have to step back and [examine] how America is failing Black mothers.

As Teach Plus Nevada Policy Fellows, current classroom teachers, teacher leaders, and *specifically as* teachers of color (TOC), we’ve witnessed first-hand the distressing impact that direct and indirect violence has on Black students’ social emotional and cognitive well-being, resulting in chronic, traumatic stress. We assert that we *must* effectively protect, support, and provide for our students’ social emotional needs and well-being to

ensure their academic achievement and success in the face of persisting violence within and against the Black community. “[Black SEL](#) looks to reach, teach, and build a system of strong [B]lack leaders that understand the importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and ways to expose and sustain SEL in [B]lack communities.”⁶

BACKGROUND & COMMUNITY CONTEXT

On Friday, January 27, video footage of the violent, brutal beating of Tyre Nichols was released to the public. The graphic images show five Black police officers savagely brutalizing Nichols during a traffic stop. Tyre Nichols was stopped by the police officers on Saturday, January 7 for suspected reckless driving - 80 yards from his home. During the traffic stop, Nichols was verbally and viciously assaulted. As a result of injuries sustained during the police assault, he was hospitalized and died three days later. The police officers have been [charged with second-degree murder, aggravated assault, two charges of aggravated kidnapping, two charges of official misconduct, and one charge of official oppression](#).⁷ Tyre’s death is one of countless deaths suffered at the hands of police. The video that captured the fatal beating is not the first that our Black community has witnessed and, we are certain, it will not be the last. Our students and our children are traumatized and retraumatized as they bear witness to the repeated death and violence in our communities—violence that is continually re-experienced through local and national media exposure. Often during such devastating moments, our Black community, our Black students, and Black children experience [symptoms of complex post-traumatic stress disorder \(CPTSD\)](#)⁸ and feel that they have limited voice and unrealized opportunity for action.

As teachers and leaders of color we recognize the importance of committing to cultivating opportunities for our Black students and our Black children to employ their voices and be involved in [action-oriented engagement that facilitates connection, communication, and contribution](#). We believe that “actions build confidence, and confidence builds strength”⁹

“For too long, we as a society have experienced a systemic devaluation of Black life, which many of our most vulnerable K-12 students have been on the receiving end of for the duration of their educational experience. This has looming impacts that become cyclical into adulthood. To truly work to facilitate more positive outcomes for our Black students, we all must acknowledge even the subtle ways in which this systemic devaluation plays a role in our conceptions and actions towards our Black students, and work to address them. Regardless of how difficult this may be.”

Dillon Booker, High School Resource English Language Arts Teacher, Teach Plus Policy Fellow

In the face of tragic injustices that disparage our students' sense of belonging, worth, and humanity, we must create and foster opportunities for and spaces in which our students feel valued, respected, and connected. This responsibility does not belong to teachers of color alone, but one that must be endeavored by all educators and leaders in all school districts and communities. We have a collective responsibility to our students. Below are our recommendations on how the state and districts should honor this responsibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS, LEADERS, & POLICYMAKERS

1. Acknowledge the Trauma of Witnessing Violence and Brutality Against Black People.

Students and children experience personal and collective trauma. [“Witnessing the repeated death of and violence towards Black people on video is a horrific event in and of itself. For Black people watching, it can have traumatizing physical and mental effects.”](#)¹⁰ Acknowledge this fact to validate and affirm students' cultural and lived experiences.

2. Recognize and Address Signs and Symptoms of Racial Trauma and PTSD.

Recognize that [“Post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\) is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it.”](#)¹¹ Students can experience PTSD symptoms that vary in time (a month to years following an event) and intensity, exhibiting anger, frustration, difficulty concentrating, avoidance, detachment that may affect student engagement and learning. Research ways to address and support students as they navigate challenges with PTSD and CPTSD. Ensure that both students and adults have access to mental health providers to provide them with strategies to process the grief and trauma associated with [dehumanization of Black people through violence.](#)¹²

3. Establish Space for Reflection, Connection, Community.

Design a 'sanctuary' (sacred space) for students to reflect, connect, and be in community. Ensure that students can engage in authentic vulnerability that strengthens and empowers them. Memphis-Shelby County Schools substitute teacher, Vontyna Durham, created such a space for reflection and connection for her middle school students, encouraging them to write [“letters to Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland and councilman Edmund Ford Sr., expressing how they felt \[about the death of Tyre Nichols\]”](#).¹³ As we commit to these sacred spaces for our

students, we must ask, “*Who is creating the ‘sanctuary’?*” and “*Does the ‘sanctuary’ benefit all students — meeting the needs of students most impacted by the traumatic event(s)?*” Seek the collegiality and collaboration of educators who have an understanding of and shared culture and lived experiences of the students represented in the classroom.

4. Create Safe and Supportive Learning Environments.

Design and facilitate intentional, safe and supportive environments in which students may reflect upon and communicate through diverse means of expression (critical discourse, poetry, drawing and/or painting, collaging, creative writing, journaling, reading), about the traumatic experiences that affect them. Ensure that the [physical, psychological, and emotional factors that impact students’ learning environments](#)¹⁴ are prioritized.

5. Examine Carcerality and Education.

Reimagine and redesign the policies and structures that seek to penalize, punish, and control students. We must examine and assess the “[carceral practices \[that\] can be understood as a relationship between educational institutions and students who are perceived to be threats to institutional interests.](#)”¹⁵ We *must not* perpetuate, within our school communities, the external systems and structures that lead to the violence against and deaths of our Black children and the members of their families.

CONCLUSION

As educators and leaders, we have a collective, ethical responsibility to care for our students as they experience persisting, [collective community trauma](#).¹⁶ We must acknowledge students’ personal and cultural trauma and design supportive learning environments and ‘sanctuaries’ (sacred spaces) that seek to mitigate the chronic and complex stresses associated with traumatic experiences, fostering connection and community. In doing so, not only do we honor the humanity and lives of Black students, we enrich individual and shared lived experiences; strengthening and empowering students as confident, contributing agents of change in their classrooms, schools, and community.

“I will always be at risk of becoming extinct. I am unsafe in my Black existence.”

Rhyannon Jovan, Lead English Teacher, Teach Plus Policy Fellow

DISCUSSION

1. How can we confront and circumvent the traumatization (and retraumatization) of Black students as we ‘hold space’ to acknowledge/discuss the violent tragedies that take place in our communities?
2. What measures can be undertaken to effectively address the symptoms of trauma and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) experienced by our students?
3. How can we help our children/students feel safe in a world that feels unsafe?
4. How can we, as classroom practitioners, identify our roles in traumatizing and/or retraumatizing students in varied contexts (i.e. choice of language, relational engagement, physical proximity, posturing, etc.)? How do we reflect, assess, and reposition ourselves in our instructional practice?
5. What are our cultural values and beliefs? How are these values in opposition to or tandem with our Black students? How do our values impact our perspectives, our biases, our support, and our care of our Black students?

“As a mom of a Black daughter I want her Black body to be safe, yet I must have conversations about the constant erasure and extinction of her identity because she is a Black Girl living in a world that sees her as a threat even as a child. A world that sees me as a threat; my identity as a Black Woman as a threat, my family’s identity as a threat. I’m exhausted - my existence is seen as a constant threat.”

Felicia Rutledge, Ph.D., Teacher of Deaf/Hard of Hearing & Regional Coordinator, Teach Plus Policy Fellowship Alumna

TEACH PLUS NEVADA TEACHING POLICY FELLOWS & ALUMNI OF COLOR

[Dillon Booker, M.Ed.*](#)

[Tracy Edwards, Ed.D.](#)

[Malcom Gillard, Ed.D.](#)

[Gail Hudson, M.Ed., NBCT, 2020 Nevada Teacher of the Year](#)

[Tamara Hudson, M.S., NBCT](#)

[Rhyannon Jovan, M.Ed.*](#)

[LaTasha Olsen, M.Ed.](#)

[Felicia Rutledge, Ph.D.*](#)

[Sheila Weathers, M.Ed., NBCT](#)

*Lead Authors

TEACH PLUS NEVADA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

[Tonia Holmes-Sutton, Ed.D., NBCT*](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We recognize and appreciate our teaching and leading colleagues who tirelessly serve our students, families, and communities. Thank you for your commitment to diverse and inclusive teaching and learning.

ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has supported demonstrably effective, solutions oriented teachers across the country to advocate for educational equity for their students.

In pursuing our mission, Teach Plus is guided by our Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.

ENDNOTES

1. Rahman, K. (2020, December 29). *Remembering the black people killed by police in 2020*. Newsweek. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.newsweek.com/george-floyd-breonna-taylor-black-people-police-killed-1556285>
2. Alexander, H. (2022, February 11). Police shot dead a record 1,055 people in 2021 with young black men the disproportionate majority. Daily Mail Online. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10500759/Police-shot-dead-record-1-055-people-2021-young-black-men-disproportionate-majority.html>
3. Tron, N. (2023, January 31). Police killings set new record in 2022: Black people made up 25% of all persons killed by cops [the police officer's right to attack people (initiate violence) is not reformable and immoral. BrownWatch. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.brown-watch.com/brownwatch-news/2023/1/27/police-killings-set-new-record-in-2022-black-people-made-up-25-of-all-persons-killed-by-cops-the-police-officers-right-to-attack-people-initiate-violence-is-not-reformable-and-immoral>
4. Bunn, C. (2022, March 3). Report: Black people are still killed by police at a higher rate than other groups. NBCNews.com. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/report-black-people-are-still-killed-police-higher-rate-groups-rcna17169>
5. Henderson, D. (2021, May 7). Black Mothers: Against All Odds. The serve project. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://blogs.baylor.edu/gssw/2021/05/07/black-mothers-against-all-odds/>
6. The Social-Emotional Learning Hub for Black People. (n.d.). Retrieved January 30, 2023 from <https://www.bing.com/search?q=black%20students%27%20sel%20in%20the%20face%20of%20trauma&qs=n&form=QBRE&=Search%20%7B0%7D%20for%20%7B1%7D&=Search%20work%20for%20%7B0%7D&=%25eManage%20Your%20Search%20History%25E&sp=-1&pq=black%20students%27%20sel%20in%20the%20face%20of%20trauma&sc=0-41&sk=&cvid=DD1040AB89444432913A0B4DAF63EFF7&ghsh=0&ghacc=0&ghpl=>
7. Picou, S. (2023, January 31). Tyre Nichols: 5 things to know about him & his death after Memphis police encounter. Hollywood Life. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://hollywoodlife.com/feature/who-is-tyre-nichols-5016665/>
8. Davis, S. (2022, May 9). Chronic stress vs. complex trauma. CPTSDfoundation.org. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from

<https://cptsdfoundation.org/2022/05/09/chronic-stress-vs-complex-trauma/#:~:text=CPTSD%20is%20a%20condition%20where%20one%20might%20experience,derealization%2C%20or%20depersonalization%20%20Suicidal%20thoughts%20and%20actions>

9. Brenegar, D. E. (2018, March 9). 3 critical keys for an effective action-oriented engagement strategy. Dr. Ed Brenegar. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://edbrenegar.com/effective-engagement-strategy/#:~:text=Connection>
10. Rascoe, A. (2023, January 29). How black people can cope with the trauma of witnessing repeated death and violence against them. KSMU Radio. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.ksmu.org/2023-01-29/how-black-people-can-cope-with-the-trauma-of-witnessing-repeated-death-and-violence-against-them>
11. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2022, December 13). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Mayo Clinic. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967#:~:text=Symptoms%20may%20include%20flashbacks%2C%20nightmares%20and%20severe%20anxiety%2C,time%20and%20good%20self-care%2C%20they%20usually%20get%20better>
12. Brown, D. N. L. (2021, May 4). Violent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor reflect a brutal American legacy. History. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/history-of-lynching-violent-deaths-reflect-brutal-american-legacy>
13. Hrach, M. (2023, January 26). Memphis students share feelings with city leaders about Tyre Nichols' death. FOX13 News Memphis. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.fox13memphis.com/news/local/memphis-students-share-feelings-mayor-about-tyre-nichols-death/6YBNN6LTU5DTFKLXWI2WZC325I/>
14. Western Governors University. (2022, February 25). 15 tips for creating a safe learning environment. Western Governors University. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.wgu.edu/blog/15-tips-creating-safe-learning-environment2202.html#close>
15. Dizon, J. P. M., Enoch-Stevens, T., & Huerta, A. H. (2022, March 26). Carcerality and education: Toward a relational theory of risk in ... American Behavioral Scientist. Retrieved February 1, 2023, from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00027642211054828>
16. Hallett, M. H. (2021, February 16). What is community trauma? Michael H Hallett. Retrieved February 1, 2023, from <https://www.michaelhhallett.com/what-is-community-trauma/>

SUPPLEMENTAL REFERENCES

- [Voices of Black Mothers United](#)
- [Black Mothers and the Lingering Wounds of Racial Violence | AAIHS](#)
- [Black Mothers Are Still Fighting For Their Murdered Children - Ms. Magazine \(msmagazine.com\)](#)
- [Understanding and Addressing Racial Trauma and Supporting Black Students in Schools – Policy Brief - IDRA](#)

- [Re-Traumatization of Black Students: The Over Utilization of Racial Trauma as an Educational Tool | Deshayla M. Mitchem – ACPA Developments \(myacpa.org\)](#)
- [71 Commands in 13 Minutes: When Tyre Nichols Couldn't Comply With Impossible Orders, Police Assaulted Him \(yahoo.com\)](#)
- [Talking to Kids about Tragedies in the News | Share My Lesson](#)
- [Tyre Nichols death: Black officers' role and race in policing - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#)