

## Education Review

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**Muhammad, G. (2023).** *Unearthing joy: A guide to culturally and historically responsive reaching and learning.* Scholastic.

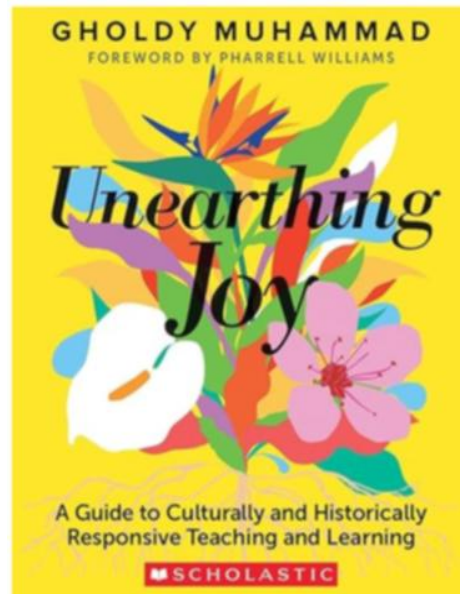
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**“We need joy as we need air. We need love as we need water. We need each other as we need the earth we share.”** *Maya Angelou*

Striving to be a culturally responsive teacher is at the heart of what we do as educators. Ghloidy Muhammad’s latest book, *Unearthing Joy*, is an excellent addition for any educator seeking to become more culturally responsive and inclusive and offers a unique approach. Each chapter begins with a playlist and ends with a coloring page, not the norm for books about education and pedagogy. These small details infuse joy and make reading an immersive experience, one that reinforces the central themes. *Unearthing Joy* creates a crucial space for joy and will take its place as one of the most significant books for educators regarding culturally responsive pedagogy.



Author Gholdy Muhammad created *Unearthing Joy* as a follow-up to her 2020 book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literature*. With the many changes that have occurred in education, Muhammad saw the need for her framework to make a critical change, the inclusion of joy, in the curriculum and classrooms. Dr. Muhammad is an award-winning professor of Literacy, Language, and Culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She created the HILL model, an instructional framework: **H**istories, **I**dentities, **L**iteracies, and **L**iberation. The HILL model has been adopted by thousands of schools and districts across the United States and Canada. In this model,

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Muhammad stresses the importance of pursuits, rather than standards. These pursuits are identity development, skills development, intellectual development, and criticality development (Muhammad, 2020). *Unearthing Joy* adds joy to this list of pursuits. Expanding from *Cultivating Genius*, these now five pursuits offer unlimited potential; they are lifelong quests to make students “grow to be more humane and contribute to the earth” (p. 17).

Organized in an easy-to-read fashion, *Unearthing Joy* is split into two parts. The first part is the philosophy behind incorporating joy into curriculum, lesson planning, and the way teachers teach. Through poetry, art, song, music, and reflective writings, Muhammad curates the essence of joy with these activities to do in the book, while her words tell the history of the relationships between culture, education, and joy. The goal of these chapters can be summed up with Muhammad’s response to a question about teaching to multiple cultures and identities.

The goal is not to teach all the cultures and identities in the world in one single school year, but to connect every lesson, unit plan, or other learning experience to students’ lives in some way. By doing that, every learning experience brings children closer to self or to the lives of other people (p.81).

When learning is made joyful and meaningful, our students' understanding is deeper, and then educational goals can be realized. We can continue a rigorous path with our content and expectations of students, while making each lesson richer and full of meaning with the connections we make. Instead of focusing on assessments, standardized tests, and standards, the focus is on identity, skills, intellectualism, criticality, and joy, creating a more worthwhile experience for students.

In Part II, the author takes all the ideas from Part I and shows how to put them into practice. Inspiration abounds as Muhammad takes what is generally thought of as curriculum and turns it around, saying, “Defining the world as curriculum means we must move about and navigate the world, and see it as full of opportunities for teaching and learning” (p. 122). Every chapter has practical applications, lesson plans, and assessments for furthering knowledge, making it easy to put knowledge and inspiration into action. Questions like “What flowers will you paint?” (p. 172) show the versatility of using the HILL model and the ability for each educator to create a joyful, aspirational, and educational classroom.

This book comes at a time when educators need it most. As the post-COVID hangover looms over education, the effects on students are not yet fully known, but teachers are bombarded with blame, burnout, and a generation of students evidencing apathy and behavioral issues. Any current teacher will agree that joy is not at the center of today’s classroom or curriculum. The answer to so many of the problems in education today can be found by successfully implementing joy into what educators do. When it comes down to it, joy, the love of teaching, the love of children, and hope for the future are why most people initially go into education. It is easy to lose sight of the reasons why when every day is a new struggle. But what if we made joy and happiness a priority? How could that change the classroom? How do students think about themselves and

the world? How do educators view their jobs? This small change, the addition of joy, can have sweeping benefits for students and teachers alike.

*Unearthing Joy* picks right up where *Cultivating Genius* (2020) leaves off, making it an important part of the canon of literature regarding modern pedagogy. As *Cultivating Genius* teaches us to find the genius and foster it in every student, *Unearthing Joy* teaches us to experience true joy every day, and to show our students the importance of happiness. *Cultivating Genius* is a deep dive into each of the pursuits Muhammad outlines as what teachers should be teaching. As *Cultivating Genius* was published, Muhammad wrote, “The pandemic exacerbated the need for joy.” She wrote *Unearthing Joy* to add the element of joy into her framework and to celebrate all the things joy can be and how it can be expressed.

An extremely poignant part of *Unearthing Joy* is the connection to Culturally Responsive Teaching. Muhammad argues that a large part of finding joy in each lesson is also culturally responsive. Historically, People of Color have served as hidden figures. There is not nearly as much recognition of the contributions from People of Color. As we open up our teaching and teach about what people from other cultures, languages, and ethnicities have offered the world, our teaching becomes joyous. Our students recognize that people who look like them can change the world. The point is further enhanced with the rhythmic words of Langston Hughes, as his poems grace the beginning of each chapter, and the sounds created by African American legends in music like Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, and Miss Janet Jackson provide a culturally significant soundtrack to each chapter.

As so many educators are striving to be more inclusive and culturally responsive, *Unearthing Joy* is a great way to achieve these goals and move toward teaching for equity. Rather than approaching cultural responsiveness as a task that needs to be included, it’s something that is celebrated. Accomplishments of voices and cultures that have been historically silenced are brought to the forefront, and people of all cultures and ethnicities are recognized with this kind of curriculum.

*Unearthing Joy* joins in line with other works, such as Christopher Emdin’s *Ratchedemic*, which teaches us to accept our students as they are as individuals, not for their compliance. If the goal of educators is truly to educate, pedagogy needs to change with the times. Each of these books has an important place in the seminal works of today’s education. When we teach acceptance, inclusivity, and identity starting at a young age, our students will gather the confidence to face the world, unashamed, and proud of who they are.

Zaretta Hammond’s book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* provides neurological evidence and research for *why* when we teach in this way it is so effective. When students do not feel included or are in “survival mode,” their brains aren’t primed to learn. Muhammad’s framework is meant to be inclusive. The addition of joy puts students in a place where they can learn. Drawing on the importance and focus on identity, the HILL model is Hammond’s argument in action. The HILL model presented in *Unearthing Joy* focuses on students’ understanding and realizing their identities, which Hammond argues is necessary

for students not to feel marginalized or unsupported (Hammond, 2015, p. 50). Hammond's work provides the reason why Muhammad's framework and modeling are so successful.

Where *Unearthing Joy* lacks is when Muhammad tackles the difficult parts of history. She describes them as harsh and painful truths, but they are just that, *truths*. When answering a question about having a joy-centered approach and still teaching true history, Muhammad replies that by teaching about the beauty of the culture first, before getting to the history about "oppression, enslavement, or colonization" (p. 85), the content is still centered on joy. While an appropriate answer, the author does not go into much more detail after. History has many dark corners. If we are of the thinking that we need to learn and remember history so as not to repeat it, we need to make sure we are teaching accurately. There are ways to recognize the joy that was lost in a historical event, but we cannot avoid or confuse the truth and the real history to add joy. In cases like slavery, the Middle Passage, or the Holocaust, I agree that we should study the culture before, but we must also not diminish or hide what happened. We are doing our students a tremendous disservice if we do not stress the absolute atrocity each of these events was. Muhammad stresses the importance of telling and teaching the truth, but many times it's an ugly truth. The question remains how to face these truths, represent them to a class in a historically accurate way, and still have a joy-centric approach.

Muhammad constructs *Unearthing Joy* in a way that educators of all grades, K-12, as well as curriculum writers, can benefit from reading. The historical parts of the book are an asset for any person, in education or not, if they want to further their historical and cultural responsiveness, a practice that would not fall on teachers alone. The practices are outlined very clearly so that every teacher can focus on them right away. The second half of the book is an excellent resource, as it has actual lesson plans, assessments, self-assessments for students, and practical ways for school leaders to be more culturally responsive and, at the same time, find the joy that comes from inclusivity.

Joy is not an element that should be a "bonus" for our students. It's a necessity that will help students to reach their academic goals when realized. There are steps every teacher can take, right away, to recognize joy and help their students see it too. The lessons we teach now should bolster our students and prepare them for the rest of their lives. When we attach meaning and joy to education, the positivity and benefits know no bounds. *Unearthing Joy* is sure to be just the beginning in this new, joyous pedagogy, which continually reminds us why we do what we do everyday.

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### About the Reviewer

**Allie Bellows** is a graduate student at the University of Colorado- Denver and a paraprofessional at Black Rock Elementary School in Erie, Colorado. She holds a B.A. in English from Arizona State University and has taught in both Hawai'i and Colorado. Her experiences in Hawai'i deeply influenced her commitment to cultural responsiveness, a practice she strives to honor in her educational spaces. Her current work focuses on teaching for equity, cultural and historical responsiveness, and inclusive classroom practices, with a commitment to amplifying historically silenced voices, including the autism community and other historically marginalized groups. She hopes to create a classroom environment where every learner feels valued, and where curiosity and joy foster meaningful connections.



### About the Author

**Gholnecsar (Gholdy) Muhammad** is the John Corbally Endowed Professor of Literacy, Language, and Culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Dr. Muhammad's scholarship has appeared in leading academic journals and books, including *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Urban Education*, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Language Arts*, and *Written Communication*. Some of her recognitions include 2014 recipient of the National Council of Teachers of English, Promising New Researcher Award, the 2016 NCTE Janet Emig Award, the 2017 GSU Urban Education Research Award, and the 2020 American Educational Research Association (AERA), Division K Early Career Award. Her Histories, Identities, Literacies, and Liberation (HILL) Model has been adopted in thousands of schools and districts. Her thought-leadership has laid the foundation for her bestselling title, *Cultivating Genius* (2020).



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