



Article

Wakanda Forever: The (Virtual) Reality of Teaching in Color

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Abstract

After decades of schools, teachers, and teacher education programs failing to repair the harm and marginalization of Black students caused by teaching malpractice, in the year 2035 the world is introduced to the Virtual Teaching in Color Wakanda headset. This technological educational device allows Black and other minoritized students to customize their teachers to look and sound like them, design their classrooms to make them welcoming and comfortable, and engage in topics aligned with their own interests. In this essay, I use foresight to argue that such futuristic thinking is critical to transforming the educational experiences of Black and other minoritized students.

Keywords

Educational Futures, Black Excellence, Teacher Education, Forecasting, Foresight

Introduction

“Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not.”

~ *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

“The future becomes tangible when you can see it, touch it, turn it over in your hand—when you turn a concept into an artifact from the future just waiting to be discovered.”

~ Institute for the Future

The year is 2035. Masike Clarke-ZNkrumah, an 11th grade high school who resides in Auckland, New Zealand, during the year’s COVID months (October-February), and in Phoenix, Arizona, otherwise, watches her self-programmed algorithmic morning updates projecting from her Virtual Teaching in Color (VTIC) Holographic Display Wakanda headset:

- **WINTER IS HERE!** Four inches of snow blankets the desert valley of Phoenix, Arizona, for the fifth consecutive January. The Washington, DC area experiences another mild winter. Rain causes flooding in New York City and parts of Boston. (*A map of flooding appears with live images filling up her bedroom*)

Masike flicks two fingers of her right hand in the air to see the next story.

- **GAME CHANGER:** Zimbabwe, the world’s leader of technology natural resources and production, discovers another large deposit of lithium in the Masvingo province. Stocks in ZimTechCorp Holdings accelerate, breaking the records they set last month.

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Masike flicks her fingers in the air again.

- **THE BILLIONAIRE CRYPTO ATHLETES:** Superstar Heroku Richardson, from Oakland, signs a five-year \$1,000,000,000 contract in crypto currency with the Mexico City Golden Eagles of the International Basketball Association (IBA). Professional Golfer OBFario Tavares signs two crypto endorsement deals: a 3-year \$700,000,000 deal with Taylormade and a 4-year \$600,000,000 deal with ElectroGo.

Masike sees the next image of a politician but quickly, almost unconsciously, motions her hand to skip the story. The next image portrays a school. The headline reads: “Student Populations at Charter Schools New York, LA, and Oakland Become Majority White.” Under the headline, “Wealthy parents prefer charter schools over private schools. Was this the goal of school reform?” Masike quickly motions past the story to those that follow:

- **HEALTH UPDATES:** Cancer death rates continue to decrease thanks to the access and intake of Japanese yam. The asthma rate in children and young adults decrease due to the use of N100-45Z tech-masks worn during the annual COVID season.
- **BYE BYE, OIL GIANTS:** Electric cars make up 75% of the automobile market share in the U.S. rendering petroleum gas stations in California, Nevada, Washington, and New York obsolete. Chevron and ExxonMobil file for bankruptcy after their lawsuits against Tesla and ElertroGo fail.

“Suri, what is market share?” Masike asks. Suri, the intelligent assistant for all Tesla virtual applications, responds, “The market share is the percent of total sales in an industry generated by a particular company. Masike, would you like me to provide an example?” Masike shakes her head and Suri replies, “Got it.” Masike continues actively engaging with daily news updates before she flashes into her lessons from Frida Oluhare on her VTIC Wakanda headset. Mrs. Frida is an African American woman with reddish black hair. Today she is dressed in golden cowboy boots, a blue blazer, and shirt that reads “Magnificent Makers. We Slay!” Her teacher projects into Masike’s Auckland bedroom. “Masike, are you ready to learn?” Mrs. Frida asks. Masike responds, “Yes, I am excited to learn about bio-dynamics-urban scientists.”

Looking Down, Not Up: Teachers Ignoring Signals of an Educational Shift

The forecasted year of 2035 is a far cry from Pre-COVID-2019 years (PC-19). The fields of technology, finance, agriculture, sports, and housing all experienced significant improvements and innovations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which lasted until 2025. Dozens of COVID variants (Alpha, Gamma, Delta, Omicron, Kappa, Psi, Rho, Sigma, and Omega, among others), along with the global climate catastrophe, and international political discord contributed to shift the social dynamics and interactions of people’s daily lives. For those who remember PC-19, most of the world has been transformed, except for the educational experiences of marginalized students of color. Although Blacks, Latinx, Asians, and Indigenous folk make up 60% of the U.S. population in 2035, White teachers continue to represent the majority of all teachers, making up nearly two-thirds of the teaching force. The failure to diversify the teaching force had been analyzed and projected in decades long annual reports (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Despite signals and drivers¹ in the media, research, and personal experiences, most Schools of Education and teaching programs failed to adjust to the needs of their increasingly diverse student population. Between 2015 and 2022, data consistently revealed that students of color were becoming majority of the student population (2021, CA Dept. of Ed; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). For example, between 2016-2018 California students of color made up 77% of the student body, while 63% of their teachers were White. A 2021 California Department of Education report stated: “The diversity of California’s current teacher population does not reflect its current student population. Diversifying California’s teacher population will have positive impacts on all students” (2021, CA Dept. of Ed).

To address these changes, several schools attempted innovative approaches to prepare and mentor teachers of color. The University of Southern California Rossier School of Education partnered with Los Angeles Unified

School District to recruit and support preservice students who reflect the students in their urban school districts. The Berkeley Graduate School of Education at UC Berkeley revamped its admission process, revised its mission, and partnered with the Transformative Justice in Education Center at UC Davis to provide justice and equity trainings for all pre-service teachers according to the 5 Pedagogical Stances: *History Matters*, *Race Matters*, *Justice Matters*, *Language Matters*, and *Futures Matter* (Winn, 2021; Winn & Winn 2021; Winn, 2020). The University of Wisconsin, Madison launched the Pledge, aimed at recruiting, training, and retaining students of color who would become teachers by offering free undergraduate and graduate tuition. Claflin University, a member of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), partnered with Clemson University to create the Call Me MISTER initiative. Its mission is to build a pipeline of diverse teachers to work in South Carolina's lowest performing elementary schools.

The efforts of USC, UC Berkeley, the UC Davis TJE Center, University of Wisconsin, Claflin University and Clemson University were important; however, they only made a small difference. The majority of teaching and education programs in the US continued to be reactive, not proactive. Teacher education programs consistently assigned culturally "irrelevant" pedagogy, leaving hundreds of thousands of students uninterested and marginalized. Teacher Credential programs also ignored the recommendations of earlier scholarship, including "Toward Shared Commitments for Teacher Education: Transformative Justice as an Ethical Imperative" that encouraged these programs to write "shared commitments grounded in transformative justice to ensure that teacher education programs and teacher educators commit to interrupting and unjust status quo" (Souto-Manning & Winn, 2019, p. 2). They urged educators to make a promise similar to the oaths that physicians and lawyers take prior to entering their respective professions.

Instead of taking this research seriously and looking to more creative and responsive ways of teacher-training post COVID-19 (Kuruville, 2018) or at more effective recruiting organizations such as the Black Teacher Project, those responsible for the predominantly White teaching force generally kept doing what they had been doing for decades: adhering to the master narrative of Whiteness as center and making Eurocentric values universal (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Sleeter, 2001; Souto-Manning & Winn, 2019). Credentialing programs graduated teachers who were not equipped for a generation of socially and critically conscious students. Unsurprisingly, but unnecessarily, Black and Brown students continued to experience the adverse impacts of federal policies, like the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and the Race to the Top (2009). All of this combined with the devastating learning loss for Black and Brown children due to constant school closures and educational interruptions caused by COVID-19. Bautista (2020) told us that "All of the historic inequities in education access that students of color already faced are compounded by a pandemic that is particularly devastating for Black and Latinx communities" (p. 2).

Schools throughout the US not only neglected to acknowledge and respond to the needs of students. They also succumbed to the political pressures of right-wing advocates demanding to dismantle, defund, and eradicate programs, curriculum, events, trainings, or positions that sought to be inclusive and equity-driven (Winkie, 2021). State legislators in Arizona, Kentucky, Alabama, and Texas drafted bills aimed at halting classroom conversations about race and society and giving parents more influence on curriculum (Blow, 2022). School districts in Texas and Pennsylvania wanted to ban Jerry Craft's *New Kid* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (Winkie, 2021). In 2022 the Governor of Florida supported a bill that prohibited public schools and private businesses from making White people feel discomfort when talking about history (Farrington, 2022). The fear of critical race theory and culturally responsive teaching became a sword that pierced the progress of K-12 education. It proved to be a dagger for some but a turning point for others. Critical educational leaders found the strength to look up and move forward.

Educational Histories and Futures of Black Children in Education

In February 2020, several days before COVID-19 became a reality for many in the United States, I, Lawrence "Torry" Winn, presented sketches of a futuristic artifact to the Institute for the Future (IFTF) at a foresight training. According to IFTF, "foresight is the process of turning facts about the present into plausible, provocative, and logical views of the future. Foresight is a mindset that encompasses creative thinking about future possibilities and a systematic analysis of patterns that affect change. Foresight tools help us sense change and communicate vision" (IFTF, 2019, p. 9). I wanted to gather signals and drivers to imagine an amazing future (forecast) for Black children. I explained to my IFTF cohort that it was imperative to design an advanced technological tool that would transform

the learning experiences of historically marginalized students of color. As an African American man with multiple advance degrees in law and education, I was exhausted with data focused on the school to prison nexus, achievement gap, school discipline, and lack of diversity in the teaching profession (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Noguera 2003; Sojoyner, 2016; Winn, 2019). Moreover, I was overwhelmed by educators' lack of urgency in repairing the harm and damage done to Black students at school. In the early 1970's, my in-laws, Dr. James and Cheryl A. Fisher, established Shule Jumamose, an Independent Black Institution located in Sacramento, CA. During the late 1960's Independent Black Institutions begin to emerge as concerned Black parents, educators, and students across the United States wanted to supplement or provide an alternative to public school education for Black youth (Rickford, 2016). The work of other African American couples such as Amiri and Amina Baraka (Newark, New Jersey) and Dr. Safisha (Dr. Carol Lee) and Haki Madhubuti (Chicago, Illinois) influenced my interest in forecasting for Black futures. Haki Madhubuti noted: "The Black Educator must realize that it is unrealistic to talk about change if you are not moving to control the instruments of change in your community" (Madhubuti, 1973, p.41). An instrument that would impact the educational futures for Black children and many other marginalized students would add to the legacies of these Black educators and many others.

Imagining Preferred Futures for Black Children in Education

During the COVID years, scholars published dozens of articles and books about Black scholars in technology (Dinkins, 2020) and the influence of virtual reality (Tracey, 2020) on racial experiences. Cogburn wrote: "racism is a visceral experience with tangible, physical effects. Virtual reality is a powerful way to immerse privileged people in that bodily discomfort. How could I give a gut punch to people, to give them a reality check around where we actually are as a society?" (Tracey, 2020). Cogburn had created the virtual reality scenario of what it was like to walk in the shoes of a Black man (such as Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and Alton Sterling) who experienced racism as a child, teenager, and adult. Users of 1000 Cut Journey could stipulate how much discomfort, pain, and trauma they would feel in their VR experience. Cogburn's acknowledgement of racism/race is rare in the research of future studies and technology integration in education. Although the purpose of future studies is to "discover or invent, examine, and evaluate, and purpose possible, probable and preferred futures," (Bell, 1997, p. 73), these "possible, probable, and preferred" futures often exclude Black folk as well as other historically marginalized communities. For example, Leahy, Holland, & Ward (2019) in their critique of the histories and futures of open learning spaces, augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI), they noted the difficulties in creating transformative educational learning experiences and teaching spaces "that may be dramatically different to what exists or what is practiced today" (p.1). One of these challenges that they failed to discuss is the absence of possible futures for Black students based on their past experiences within schools.

My collaborators and I working at the Educational Futures for Black Children Lab at the Transformative Justice in Education (TJE) Center at the University of California, Davis, were motivated to envision the creation of VR technology (future artifact) to meet the needs, wants, and desires of Black students. We researched the trends in AR, VR, and AI (Future Today Institute, 2018). The research team focused on creating virtual reality teaching and learning spaces for Black and Brown students that centered on by five urgent realities:

1. All students were becoming more tech savvy and engaged in virtual reality.
2. The percentage of teachers of color was not keeping pace with the changing faces in the student body.
3. Many Black and Brown children were moving to the suburbs where there were fewer teachers of color.
4. All students, but especially Black and Brown students, wanted an alternative learning experience.
5. Anti-Blackness, racism, and anti-Black intellectualism in education is too rooted in teaching, teacher education programs, and curriculum.

Based on these realities, we built a scenario or a story about a future state based on facts, drivers, and signals. This scenario illustrates the educational futures for Black children as revealed in the lives of Lexi, Coltrane, Melody, Tias, and Masike.

“The Future is Here”: Super Dopefied Classrooms & Customized Teachers

Lexi Osaka, a high school student who interned at the Educational Futures for Black Children Lab between the years of 2025 and 2028, knew all too well the issue in schools impacting Black students. She said that her generation would like to see teachers as futuristic action figures like Suri in the *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*: “How cool would it be for teachers to dress up and teach us the superpowers of Math and Science and how to read faster and how to compute numbers in our heads at crazy rates? How cool would it be (like, way out there cool!) to have an alternative experience to learning that is way way way out there? I imagine – I can see it now – a super dopefied classroom that is bright and colorful (super orange and soft yellow and baby bluish) and futuristic. Like the stuff you see in Wakanda. The future is here. I want to be able to use emojis and design my teacher. I want her to look like me or somebody I want to be around.”

Lexi’s desire for superhero learning powers and a super dopefied classroom experience led to the creation of the Virtual Teaching in Color Wakanda headset (2035). The headset projects Wakanda-like holographic displays of teachers who are customized by students. It was designed to offer students of color an experience of learning subjects from teachers who were Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian. Coltrane is one of these students. An African American first-grader, his parents relocated to Salt Lake City, Utah, just after he finished Kindergarten. Leaving his Kinder classroom was hard, especially because he was one of the few to have Kindergarten co-teachers who were Black. Now, Coltrane attends a school district that has no African American teachers and only one Latinx teacher. Coltrane is the only African American student in the entire school and is the first Black student in five years. He is a gifted student, interested in Math and coding. His parents, both aerospace engineers and members of the local Jack and Jill, Inc., learned about the Educational Futures for Black Children Lab. They purchased the VTIC Wakanda headset. Instead of Coltrane going to Kumon for in-person Math lessons, he puts on his Wakanda headset and learns multiplication and division from Professor Devin, a Black Math teacher. Coltrane is able to customize the outfit for his teacher. Since he is a fan of the book series *Code Swaggers* he selects ATLien as his teacher. Other features of the VTIC Wakanda headset include picking the Intro and Outro music at the beginning and end of class, and dopefying the classroom in every imaginable way.

Melody is a Hmong and Dominican high school student who lives in Atlanta, Georgia. Her family relocated there from Madison, Wisconsin, when Melody was 12. Her family wants her to learn Spanish. Melody plans to study abroad in Costa Rica while in college. The Spanish teacher at her school, Mrs. Anderson, is a White middle-age woman who has never visited any country where Spanish is the primary language. Melody’s parents purchased the Wakanda headset. Melody picks Profesora Bela Diaz, a native Spanish speaker, to be her teacher. Instead of listening to Mrs. Anderson in that cramped classroom every day, after school Melody is immersed in the teaching superpowers and bright, musical world of Profesora Diaz whose exploration and teaching of Spanish is artful, engaging, and provoking.

Tias loves fashion and wants to become a fashion designer. Unfortunately, her middle school does not offer any courses in fashion. Every morning she checks her social media account for the latest fashion featured in the Blu Ivy app. For her 13th birthday her grandmother buys a Wakanda headset. Tias selects Teacher Shuri as her fashion design teacher. Teacher Shuri helps Tias explore units of measurements, textiles, fabrics, and cost analysis. Shuri also introduces Tias to visionaries and students in the fashion and tech fields. She studies the designs of the Black world renown fashion icons: Kerby Jean-Raymond, Kethlyn White, Taofeek Abijako, Edvinn Thompson, Johy Nelson, and Nigella Miller (Friedman, 2021).

Black Excellence Visualized: Past, Present and the Future

The educational experiences of Coltrane, Melody, and Tias is finally realized. For decades leading up to 2035, Black students and their families had been subjected to the influence and control of an educational system that did not reflect their values. Although scholars such as Madhubuti (1973), Siddle Walker (1996), and Rickford (2016) provided examples of academic excellence of Black educators teaching Black students, school districts and Schools of Education neglected to respond meaningfully to the empirical research (Foster, 1997; Milner, 2015; Siddle Walker, 1996; Woodson, 1933). Madhubuti writes: “If Black People controlled the education of [B]lack children then the whole question of culture would not be discussed solely in terms of philosophy, but it would be practiced from day to day” (Madhubuti, 1973, p. 47). With the Wakanda headset Black folk control their child educational

futures. As noted by Leahy, Holland, & Ward (2019) “it is important for us to remember that technologies are not neutral entities, they are values-laded, and become culturally embodied when integrated in practices and thus, have the capacity to be used in ways that restrict or transform learning” (p.3). The Virtual Teaching in Color Wakanda headset provides a way for Black children, as well as Brown, Asian and Indigenous children, to learn curriculum grounded in their experiences and relevant to their history and futures. No longer restricted by the failures of local schools and teacher education programs, students of color and families can learn from Professor Devin, Profesora Diaz, or Teacher Suri. They can explore their rich histories and be the creators of their futures. The Wakanda headset² gives students of color access to Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous teachers regardless of where they live. They can customize their teachers to look, feel, and talk like them as well as create swaggy, dope classrooms.

#Blackwomanscience #Blackwomanwriter

“Masike, are you ready to learn?” Mrs. Frida flashes two prompts on the screen. “Masike” please select which scientist you want to explore today:

- Dr. Theanne Griffith is a neuroscientist and professor. She is the author of the book series, *The Magnificent Makers*. #Science#FictionWriter#ChildrenBooks#BlackwomanScience
- Dr. Corbett, a professor, is one of the lead immunologist designers for the COVID-19 vaccine. #Vaccines#Science#BlackwomanScience#Immunology

“Mrs. Frida, I can’t decide! Let’s explore both.” Masike’s Wakanda headset projects a science lab into her bedroom. Mrs. Frida turns into a new image. “Welcome to the world of neuroscience, my name is Professor Griffith, but you can call Professor G.” Masike is engaged. Her smile is as wide as the sea. All she can think about is her future in science.

Notes

- 1- “Signals are specific events or innovations happening today that you instinctively feel will take us in a new direction... Drivers are large, long-term underlying directions of change that will shape the future. They often have deep roots in historical patterns of change” (IFTF, 2019, p.12).
- 2- The virtual reality experience is limited only to students and families. School districts are prohibited from purchasing a license unless the school district can prove that it lacks Black and Brown teachers not because of a failure in recruiting efforts but because of its isolated location.

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