

Black Deaf Studies Matters: Deaf Education Panel Discussions

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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Abstract

This panel explores the lived experiences of Black Deaf educators working within the U.S. Deaf education system. Panelists reflect on systemic racism, audism, underrepresentation, and the emotional labor involved in advocating for Black Deaf students. Their stories highlight the tension between joy and exhaustion, resistance and reform, within institutions shaped by whiteness. Emphasis is placed on community-driven change, inclusive pedagogy, and language equity. The conversation critiques tokenism in academic spaces and calls for structural change while affirming the cultural strengths of Black Deaf communities. The panel underscores the urgency of representation and the creation of educational spaces built “for us, by us.”

Keywords

Black Deaf Studies, Community Empowerment, Deaf Education, Educational Equity, Intersectionality, Linguistic Justice, Representation, Resistance, Systemic Racism, Youth Development

Panel Transcript

Reggie: Hey. Ho. Yes. Getting some energy.

So first, I want to introduce myself. I am Reggie Bess. So, before I start asking them some questions, first, they kept it real, right? They will tell it like it is. Right? They were bringing the truth.

But first, y'all did it. Right? Y'all just did it. But not in a way that it was harmful, but they spoke the truth. All y'all did it. You feel me?

Before I get into the questions, Carolyn mentioned that we like to repeat ourselves during some stories. I said, yeah, that's true. Some might feel like I am asking them questions that have already been answered. But you need to see it, over and over, because we are oppressed over and over again! I'm going to start my questions, but let me tell y'all a story. It'll be brief and to the point because Evon already warned me about the time. So, anyway, let's do it.

My story is real quick. So, I went to college because my mom told me to, right? She told me I have to graduate. And after graduating, my mom was like, "Listen, where are you going to get a job?" I said, "Well, I want to become a teacher." So, I became a teacher. Fast forward. I'm a moderator, not a presenter. I'm trying to be short.

I'm sharing my story because we're talking about Black Deaf education. So that boy, me, I'm a math teacher. I have been teaching for 15 years in Deaf education. So, I was teaching ninth grade, and I met with my class for two weeks. I be teachin' and telling them all about Blackness and then some. Teaching the Black way, right? After two weeks, a boy raised his hand and said, "Wait, something must be wrong with this school. They must have made a mistake to hire you. You're supposed to be a white teacher. You're supposed to be a white hearing woman". I said what? That's my quick story. Now to the panelists. Give it up for our panelists.

Now, for our panelists, like I said, you want to keep it real up in here. We can show them presentations and make nice suggestions. But we've got to show who we are and let them know. All right? Let's bring it.

Be concise. You know how we can go on and on and on. Let's bring it to the point. Sorry, but I have an educator background.

First question. Your name, name sign, and your current position. Are you certified or not

in your current role? Again, to the point.

Akilah: Hi! I'm future Dr. Akilah English. I'm currently the Program Coordinator for DC Public Schools.

Reggie: That's what's up! Next.

Andrea: Hello, I'm Andrea. This is my sign name. I'm currently a consultant and a teacher, providing workshops to Deaf residential schools around the country. Was that all we were supposed to answer, I think?

Gloshanda: You know, I'm not a rule follower. So, hello. I am Gloshanda Lawyer. This is my sign name. I'm a consultant. I'm also a certified interpreter. I'm a licensed teacher for early childhood special education and Deaf education. And what else am I supposed to do?

Okay, that's it now. Turn it over to Glennis.

Glennis: I am Glennis Matthews. I'm taking what you said. I'm stealing it. I, too, am the future Dr. Glennis Matthews. I am currently the superintendent of The Learning Center located in Massachusetts.

Reggie: All right now. You know, yes. They are awesome. They are lit. Look at them. You know, this is our space. Akilah mentioned home space. Andrea talked about caring for our Black Deaf bodies. Let's do that today! We had Gloshanda talking about bringing out the energy and working together. And then Glennis was showing her Blackness.

The first question, we only have two questions, and that's it. The first question: What is it like to be Black Deaf working in Deaf education? And then also thinking about what you want to see change from Deaf schools with Black Deaf students -- again, no rambling. Get to the point. Time. We're looking at the time now.

Glennis: Let's go down the row. You start.

Akilah: Okay. Sure. I'm happy to respond to that question first. I have been involved in Deaf education for 16 years in total. And I was a resource teacher at a public school. And then I transferred and spent ten years in a classroom at a residential school for the Deaf. And for the last five years, a program coordinator. I have different lenses from a resource teacher, a teacher in the classroom, and an administrator perspective. Though I have had different roles in those 16 years, my experiences have been the same. I have to be cautious in how I navigate that educational environment, trying to be an advocate for those students. I try to be careful not to lose my job or experience reprimands. What's interesting is that for the past five years, I have been an administrator, and I thought, okay, I *thought* that I had power. I thought that I could make changes. I thought that I had a voice and a seat at the table. And I realized, actually, I don't. Because the system is so pervasive and has been operating from the very beginnings of this country. So, navigating and trying to dismantle the system overnight is an impossibility. So instead of challenging the system, I thought about what I could do within my power, what I can change, what I can do right now, and what's within my control. In the last few years, I have been documenting the successes. For example, students who were Deafblind and being able to fight for them and successfully getting a Deafblind intervener. Those are little successes and small achievements I have been documenting. So, on days I experience struggles, I can look back on that list and recognize that I have made changes. They may seem small, but I celebrate each small win. I shifted my thinking from the overwhelming woes of the system to what I can do within my power to make a change, and celebrate those wins. Being able to know, even though I deal with a system that can be overwhelming at times, I can shift my thinking to say, let me celebrate the small wins.

Reggie: Give it up for Akilah! Where I come from, if you clap, that means they can't say no more.

Andrea: I'll go straight to the point. There are many different truths that happen at the same time. So, being a Black Deaf teacher was so liberating and exhausting at the same time. In the classroom, with Black Deaf students, we would dance and laugh, collaborate and understand, and love one another. That's where my joy comes from.

And then when I left my classroom to go to the next classroom and left that classroom to go to the next classroom, I had to battle with teachers and administrators about how racism was showing up in the school, how audism was showing up in the school. And how those oppressions cost physical and mental exhaustion. So being a Black Deaf educator is heart-filling work, and at the same time, it's heartbreaking work. That's it in a nutshell.

Reggie: Say no more. My Black students would say: FACTS.

Gloshanda: I will have to say the same as Akilah, of a similar experience I had on various levels. I used to teach in a Deaf school, so I have the K through 12 experience. I was also a university professor, where I trained future Deaf educators. Looking at those two experiences, I have to say that my input, my knowledge, and my opinion were never really valued by the school system, that is. With the families and children, the relationship was great! But the people working in the education system, they just basically ignored what I had to say. And so, there was a time when I wanted to show up with joy, because that's my personality, like Andrea. I would have drum songs in the class, for example. I'm not sure if you are familiar with drum songs, but my young Deaf students would be drumming. We would do that every morning to get the energy set for the day. We would sing "Good morning, Good morning! Hello! Hello! Happy, happy, to see you, to see you!" with the drums. But the other teachers would come and say Excuse me, you're being very loud and you're bothering my class. I'm thinking this is a Deaf school! That's something I would experience again and again and again.

So, I would advocate for my students, specifically disabled Deaf students as well. I noticed time and again that Deaf schools are not prepared to support disabled students.

The school will often exclude them and send them to hearing schools where they would be language deprived, but they would have the supports for their disabilities. So, I would work with disabled students because in my culture, we culturally know how to engage with disabled people. So, the other students would start to send them all to my class. I'm thinking, well, after they go through my classroom, where are they going next? I can't progress with them and teach them every year. The other teachers have to learn those skills too. But they were not willing to do it.

Secondly, in higher education, I would have to say that all students at the college level where I was were white. And they always said the same thing. They have never experienced a Black professor. In the United States of America, how can you teach Black Deaf students if you have never experienced having a Black professor? So, constantly advocating on the system level was frustrating. Now I have started to withdraw from the system. I'm focusing on the community. Because if hearing and Black and brown communities can come together and expose the community in terms of trainings and workshops, hearing people can take that on and have a ripple effect to impact other hearing people with the hopes that they can pass that down and make change for Black Deaf education and the system itself at large. So again, I'm now mobilizing in the community to hopefully have a ripple effect on the future of Deaf education.

Reggie: I feel you. Glennis.

Glennis: You know, Reggie and Candace, the three of us had the opportunity to work together at the same school, ASD. And we actually met here. The last time we saw one another was about two years ago. The conversation we had was about what was going on there while we were there. We didn't realize the impact we had on our students while we were there. 93% of the student body is Black. These are Black students. 6% of them are white students. They all thought they were siblings. The school environment was Black! And the three of us were there. At that time, we did not even realize the impact that we had. Ironically, the three of us also left school at the same time. But my point is

that Black Deaf education is so important because it is! Because there are Black Deaf students there. They don't realize it, we don't realize it, but they need role models. That's one point. The other is, the thing I would like to see different, is difference. That's what I want to see. I want to see the difference. I want to see it happen at all levels, in every conversation. Just do it! I remember the first shirt I bought at Spellman. Thinking, hey, I'm supporting my Spellman. On the back of the shirt was a powerful message. What it said was "lead, follow, or get the Hell out of the way". Move on. Move on. And I still have that shirt. That's exactly what I want to say today to everyone in this room. Either lead -- are you looking at me? Follow, or move out of the way. Don't be a barrier. We have goals. We're moving forward. All right?

Panelists: Amen, amen, amen.

Reggie: Amen. Look at Dr. McCaskill. She said, "Get the hell out of the way!"

Glennis: I didn't wanna get fussed at. You know, I was trying to be nice.

Reggie: No cap. No cap. Anyway, last question. And then I'm hoping we have time for questions from the audience.

They already mentioned it, which is very nice to hear, but tell me, what is one unique challenge within Black Deaf education? I know you said there are a lot of challenges. But why does Black Deaf education matter in Deaf education? Why? Why does it matter? Why is it important?

Akilah: Why is that even a question?

Glennis: And thank you very much. We're done. That's it.

Reggie: Together now: Period.

Panelists: Period.

So, one question from the audience. Then we will close.

All right, everybody. So, in terms of Black Deaf educators and how diverse they are within the school system, specifically looking at the Academic Bowl -- over the past many years, we mostly see white people and Deaf elites showcased in the Academic Bowl. You don't see a lot of diverse people like Latino, Black, or Asian when statistically those populations are increasing. Why is that happening? What are your thoughts and strategies, and how can we change and improve this? The same white Deaf elites tend to participate in the Academic Bowl. Something has to change.

Glennis: I don't know if the four of us can make that change alone. It's going to require all of us, including white Deaf teachers. Every teacher in the Deaf educational system needs to work to encourage students of color to join [Academic Bowl]. Most of the time, when I say we, I mean Black and brown people. We do not assert ourselves. We're waiting for somebody else to influence us or inspire us. It's sad, but it's true. All of us present in this room need to invest more to attract and motivate those students to join. We all need to get involved in order to see change. It's not just the four of us, it's about all of us in this room.

Andrea: Let me hop in here. Yeah, I -- did you want to add it too? Okay.

Akilah: No, go ahead.

Andrea: In the school experience, what I have noticed is that we want to make sure we change the environment of the Academic Bowl to make sure Black and brown Deaf students feel welcomed in that space. And what I have learned in one school is that some Black Deaf students are thinking to themselves What is the entire point of it? Why do I need to participate in that? What is it even for? I think we need to respect their decisions. They see that there are no Black Deaf students there, and having a Black

Deaf student participate is not enough reason for them to join. Another thing I learned is that while the Academic Bowl practices and events are happening, they feel lucky to have that time to be with a specific teacher who is not involved in the Academic Bowl.

So, some of them may feel that not being part of that may give them more time and space to be with one another, and an environment in a classroom with a teacher they want to have that time with. So, it became a catch-22. There are many different views around this, and different nuances around why we don't see Black Deaf students, and not all the reasons are bad. This is another form of resistance against the system, an act of resisting being tokenized by white Deaf people. So, some are intentionally not participating as an act of resistance. That's another perspective.

Akilah: I would like to add: What was the purpose of creating the Academic Bowl? What was its purpose in the first place? It's an academic Ethos throughout the educational system. So why add something else to continue that violence? The academic world is full of intellectuals trying to prove they are smart. If you want to dismantle the system and reduce violence, maybe we should reconsider if having an Academic Bowl is worth it. Why not create a space where students' motivations and interests are nurtured rather than creating a system to measure their intelligence and experience violence? So, the other perspective is, what does the Academic Bowl serve?

Gloshanda: I would only add the language aspect. For example, is there a place in the Academic Bowl where our language would be accepted? The way that Reggie is signing today, would that be accepted? It's still filled with knowledge and value, but it would be devalued as not up to par for that context. Think about the language too. Black Deaf students have an array of beautiful languages they use. They can show up in that space and have knowledge, but what if it does not match that setting? I agree with what everyone has said. Sometimes we have to critique the system. Instead of us trying to fit into the system's context, it's okay to withdraw. It's okay to leave the system and create something for us, by us. So that doesn't mean that the system is bad; the academic bowl is something negative. It's fine. We have our things too, and as long as they

respect us and acknowledge us as equals, then it's fine. And we move forward separately but equal. I think about the concept that we don't always have to play by the system. We can create our own for our people.

Reggie: So that's a wrap! I want to thank all of our presenters, all of the video, and everybody for doing an amazing job. It's been wonderful.

And lastly, I want to say, because I promised I would keep it rolling. We did it. We did it. We made history.

Dr. McCaskill asked me what this sign means. Remember, Dr. McCaskill mentioned Black ASL being created from segregation and then having the influence of African American Vernacular English. One particular student, Glennis and Candace know who that student is, would overuse the word "true". Everything that was said, the student would respond, "That's true. That's true." Absolutely. Yep. That's true. We don't say it like this. This boy, I'm telling you, when he was in trouble, he was brilliant. But he would be like -- FACT. That's the sign. It's regionalism. There are regionalisms and different ways in which the language is expressed regionally.

We out.



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