

Eric Neal:

Welcome to the State Support Team 11 Podcast. I'm your host, Eric Neal. Today, we are joined by Dr. Gholdy Muhammad. Dr. Muhammad is an associate professor of literacy, language and culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has previously served as a middle school teacher, literacy specialist, school district administrator, and school board president. Dr. Muhammad's scholarship has appeared in leading educational journals and books. She has received numerous national awards. She also works with teachers and young people across the United States and South Africa in best practices in equity, anti-racism, and culturally and historically responsive instruction. She is the author of the best-selling book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Model for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*.

Eric Neal:

Welcome, Dr. Muhammad. How are you today?

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

I'm doing great. Thank you Eric for having me. I hope you're doing well also.

Eric Neal:

I am. Thank you for joining us. We really do appreciate it. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that you do?

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Sure. I... You know, sometimes when people ask, I don't know where to begin. It feels like a lot in a short time. But, you know, I started my career off... I always knew I wanted to be a teacher since I was accepted into this program in Illinois called Golden Apple Scholars, where they take students in high school and help to train, educate and prepare them to be teachers. So, right away, scholars get such a rich and in depth level of pedagogy and how to teach in schools. In my professional work, I've served as a classroom teacher, teaching middle school English Language Arts and social studies. I've also worked in literacy as a literacy coach and specialist and also in curriculum as a school district administrator over curriculum and instruction, where I got to design interventions and curriculum and pedagogies for teachers K through 12.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

You know, and more recently, I served as now an associate professor of language, literacy and culture, and work with undergraduates and who are preparing to be teachers and graduate students as well. I work with teachers all over the country, in different parts of the world, on literacy instruction and culturally and historically responsive pedagogies and how to elevate the education of all children, and uniquely, those who have been underserved, like black children, across the system.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

So, in addition to that, I write. I love to write. I just finished writing a children's book. I like to go wherever my pen takes me and... But, in addition, I write poetry and of course essays and academic pieces as well and curriculum. I write curriculum every week.

Eric Neal:

The love of writing. I've also enjoyed that in my life and it's nice to be able to have the freedom to be able to go the different directions you want to go. You know, most times, we get set in our job and I write lots of professional development opportunities or guidance for teams.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

[crosstalk 00:03:41]

Eric Neal:

Not necessarily as exciting as being able to pick up and do a children's book when you want to.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

But, you know what? Some of the PDs I write, they are very creative, and I'm sure yours, too. Right? It feels like you're telling a story like you would in a children's book.

Eric Neal:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

But, in your PD and in your documents with teacher. I think those are all forms of creative writing.

Eric Neal:

No, you're absolutely right. You know, something that you said that was really interesting to me was the Golden Scholars that you were talking about. So, is this...? This is a project where you're taking these students and kind of guiding and supporting them into the education field? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

The organization is called Golden Apple Scholars of Illinois. I was a scholar. I was a young scholar. So, I was a part of this organization. They've been around for a long time and what they do... They identify students who are either, I think, juniors in high school or sophomores in college who want to be teachers. And, for a long time, they would accept 100 scholars across the state who exemplified this love, this desire, this art, this craft for teaching. And, what they would do with us is pull teachers, professors, across the state and maybe across other states as well and each summer we would have in depth courses and we would spend our summers in Chicago Public Schools, teaching, before we even entered our teacher ed programs.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

We were learning the pedagogy, the theory, models of education. We were learning to be brave and exude confidence in teaching. We had to take a song and rewrite the lyrics to be more... That will capture how we felt about teaching and we had to perform it in front of everybody. And, you know, I just remember doing that and I figured if I could do that, I could stand in front of children and teach.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

So... But, in addition to that, like I said, we learned lesson planning, curriculum and all these things so early on. It's a beautiful program and an excellent model for other states.

Eric Neal:

I really love it because I find in my work and in the state in general, there's been this big recent push towards equity.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Eric Neal:

But, I don't think there's anything more equitable than providing these opportunities for some people who might normally be left out of being able to get into the profession but also that have a different perspective when they get there than... You know, I worked in inner city district in California before I came to Ohio. I worked in Columbus City Schools, the largest district in the state here, an urban district in Ohio. And, the... A lot of times, you look and you see that the teachers are not the same group as some of the students that they teach and I feel like as educators, most people work hard to make connections and do all of these things, but it's not the same as having people from your community or from... That understand you. [inaudible 00:07:18] A lot of times, those people are shut out from these opportunities.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Right. Absolutely. And, it's... Access is a big part of equity, but in representation and... But, beyond that, it goes deeper. Right? It goes... Once people get into these spaces and get to see themselves represented in these genius ways... You know, how we cultivate their minds and their thinking and practice really matters because we could have these equitable spaces or these really great programs, but it can fall short once after they have that access. Right? It could fall short on what we teach them and how.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

So, yeah. It's just lots of things to consider when thinking about equitable practices.

Eric Neal:

So, you said you worked with higher ed and planning some of these, what? Teacher preparation programs and things like that. How are we doing at getting the content that these young teachers need so that they're prepared to go out and serve some of these underserved communities? I did school improvement efforts for some districts that fall under in continuous improvement, differentiated accountability, and it seems like if you go out and get your teaching experience at just a traditional suburban school or something where maybe you're not exposed to some of the needs and the challenges that you're going to face when you get to these other districts, it... How are...? Are we doing a better job with partnering with the higher ed organizations and universities to get what people need when they get into the schools? Because a lot of times, I feel like we're getting some of the same teacher preparation things that you got 20 years ago when I was in a teacher preparation thing or when Madeline Hunter was standing there teaching people 30 years ago.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

[inaudible 00:09:23]

Eric Neal:

How are we working on that?

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Well, you know, I think it's a bit sporadic. I think some people are doing such advanced work and some are doing kind of like you said, the same thing. I think one thing we have to... You know, and I think that on my own... I went through teacher preparation at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville and we had rotations in urban, I think rural, suburban, different educational contexts, and when I compared the suburban context to the East St. Louis, the urban context that I was in, I realized that they may have had more resources in the suburban context, but they were just as underserved, the children. They were not teaching identity, culture, consciousness. That's doing a disservice.

Eric Neal:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

So, first, we have to dismantle these ideologies. We know that there are certain needs, but there are some schools that are doing really well in cultivating a child's sense of self and consciousness but might struggle with academic success. And then, there are some schools that do well with academic success but that black child leaves not knowing who they are or whose they are. Right? I, in my early part of my personal education, like K-12, I had the first part. Well, I had a little bit of all three of those things like in Gary, Indiana, in an urban context. But, when I moved to the suburbs, I didn't have any culture, any identity, any social political consciousness where I was trying to play catch-up in my learning that my high school didn't give me.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

So, that's the first thing. I think teacher education programs need to know who they are and what kinds of ideologies they want to represent. What type of a future teacher do they want to cultivate? And then, I believe that they have to do like a sweep of the program, of the syllabi, to see how are we teaching consciousness, criticality, joy, because we have a lot of teachers leave the profession very early because they lack joy. How are we teaching students, our undergraduate students or our pre-service teachers, to leave and know how to develop curriculum? Some people don't even know how to write lesson plans. That's why they rely on this disconscious curriculum that schools give them.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

And then, we have to make sure that our programs are not just have that one diversity class like I had.

Eric Neal:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

I had a one multicultural class. You may have had that, too.

Eric Neal:

[inaudible 00:12:07]. I had that class. Yeah.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

So, it's like, okay, that's checked off. But, how can all classes be multicultural, diverse, culturally responsive, instead of just having that one class and you get everything to teach diverse learners or black and brown children in that class? You know, we have to ask what texts are the students reading or not reading. What theories are they learning, not learning? What methods are they learning, not learning? Frameworks, models. And, we want our pre-service programs to have diverse models, not just cognition, not just social cultural, not just criticality or critical theories, but all theories put together. Feminism. Like, all of these theories can help to shape my teaching practice and that's what we want students to leave. We want them to be ready and prepared to teach all sorts of diverse learners.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

So, I can argue that many teacher ed programs don't prepare to teach black and brown children well, but maybe not white children well.

Eric Neal:

[crosstalk 00:13:19]

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Because, white children need criticality and joy and all these things. So, it calls for a re-thinking and, as you named, partnerships with schools instead of... You know, the traditional partnership is like, "Okay, Eric. You're at this school district. We're sending, as the school, as the university, we're sending 150 pre-service teachers in your district." That's been the partnership.

Eric Neal:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

No, no, no, no, no. It has to be a reciprocal relationship where we're building and learning and advancing our thinking together, where we're helping, we're training mentor teachers and we're creating programs and universities are giving schools more than just student teachers but we're giving them frameworks. We're getting them pedagogies. We're giving them curriculum. That's the real goal [crosstalk 00:14:13].

Eric Neal:

Yeah. I'm with you. I'm with 100%. It feels to me like we... You do need the nuts and bolts, I think.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Eric Neal:

Because, those things, they are important and they'll always be important.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

[inaudible 00:14:25]

Eric Neal:

But, it's more... Rather than taking... Like you said, I took the multicultural education class at my teacher prep program.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Yes.

Eric Neal:

It's more what I'm imagining of a cultural competency perspective. It's how to recognize and be able to facilitate education with a diverse group of learners of all different types, because I think we teach people things about people but we don't teach pre-service teachers how to have a welcoming classroom environment, how to know...

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Eric Neal:

Like, identify what people's cultural needs are or how to have difficult conversations in the way that are safe and uplifting and nurturing to people and not go off the rails and cause more damage than not talking about them in the first place. You know? It's like, those... There's a skill set to that that I think is missing in a lot of times and we throw these new teachers to the wolves. Right? It's like, "All right. Get out there and do your best." But, it's a tough job to begin with without giving them what they need to do that kind of work.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Absolutely. And, as you said or alluded to, I think a lot of student teachers don't have opportunities to just reflect on themselves and who am I. Before I learn who my students are and what they need, what do I need? Who am I and how can I...? What ideologies do I have and how have they been shaped and conditioned over time? Because, those, what people call bias and things, that starts to come out in your practice if you don't do that sort of therapeutic work too of self-awareness.

Eric Neal:

Right? And, especially when you hear all the time, because we think of when you have these biases and there's lots of implicit and explicit racism and things that are going on.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Eric Neal:

But, even when people mean well sometimes, you'll see things like this where they say, "Well, I lowered down the rigor of what we were doing because I don't want them to feel bad." Or, things like that. You know? Not necessarily coming from a place of being negative, but that is doing damage by not having high expectations and putting things in place for all students to be able to learn.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:
Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Eric Neal:

So, I think you're... I think you're right about how can we... How can we help people to know each other and know themselves?

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:
Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Eric Neal:

And, to be able to then create those equitable environments, because I don't think it's... It's not set up just to happen naturally.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Right. No, it's not, and there's a lot of things that I call for in my work that are not set up naturally. I mean, when you think about this idea of genius, genius isn't really set up to naturally happen because teachers don't have time in their schedules to just sit and plan like for real, like plan for genius and to adapt curriculum to be creative like we've talked about creativity in our writing, in our lesson plans. You know? There's a lot of things that teachers need where the system isn't really set up. I think teachers need what I call libratory wellness and time to reflect and take care of themselves and a lot of that isn't really built into the school year.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. And, even the way we disproportionately identify people for, say, gifted education. You know, if your district just uses Terra Nova and says that's it. You score this score, you're gifted. You score this score and you're not gifted. It leaves out so many gifted people that maybe don't even get a foot in the door to begin with.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

[inaudible 00:18:33]. Yeah. And, what I'm doing is training and preparing teachers to question Terra Nova, who wrote it, who didn't, what lenses and theoretical points, viewpoints, or theoretical lenses did they use to write the assessment. What's the history of gifted education? You know, they'll find... And, who did they serve? Who didn't they serve? What categories? Compare the historical categories of gifted ed compared to now. And, the categories are even different, where they took off certain things that allowed more children of color to get into. They removed those categories. So, before you just test and screen and call students these labels like gifted, no. Intellectualize it. Historicize it. Know what you're doing. Don't just do it just because somebody's been doing it that way before you.

Eric Neal:

Oh, definitely. And, I'm a big proponent of multi-tiered systems of support if done well and equitably because I believe we need these frameworks to help find out where everything goes. We have these complex systems that a lot of times make it hard for people doing different work at different places to communicate and I'm a big proponent of systems and frameworks.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Eric Neal:

That leads me to ask you about your book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework*. How did you take those ideas of putting some structure to this to help people do this important work?

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

You know, I got to say it all came from the ancestors. I'm merely a researcher who asked a lot of questions. Instead of having human living participants, my data was the archives and historical documents from the early 19th century, a little bit before that and a little bit after, and I would read about practices, about different writings from black ancestors who have lived before, and I started to notice something beautiful happening. I would read about how they educated themselves and each other and I said, "That's what we should be doing in schools today. That's so beautiful. Why aren't we doing this? How were they doing this in 1828 and we're not doing this now?".

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

And, I would start to ask questions like, "What did you do to advance your educational achievement? What were the goals you set out, your standards?" And, I [inaudible 00:21:17] asking all these questions and I felt like again and again they were answering back in their writings and that's what writers do. It feels like we're reading and having conversations with authors. Right? And, from my research and my reading, I came to these pursuits that I write about in *Cultivating Genius*. I noticed that they didn't call their learning goals standards. They called them pursuits and pursuit was a word to talk about education again and again, and we talk about education as standards-based. I mean, we hear that more than anything. I never saw that word being taught and talked about.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

And so, they had these five pursuits which I write about. I write about the first four more in depth and in my next book, I'm really hitting on the fifth pursuit. But, these pursuits are identity development. As they were engaged in education and learning and teaching, they were cultivating a sense of self and learning about people who are different than them. I would find that they would read about Chinese fashion. I mean, black people in the early 1800s in the United States. They weren't just in the pursuit of learning about their African, their black identities, their collective identities, but they wanted to learn about different cultures, maybe so that they knew the truth and justice behind different people so they wouldn't be inclined to hurt, to harm, to stereotype.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

They had the pursuit number two of skills. They wanted to learn proficiencies in things. They wanted to learn, number three, intellectualism. They wanted to become smarter about new things, new people, new places, new concepts, new histories. And, fourth, they wanted to know criticality. They wanted to

be able to name, understand, question, interrogate the hurts, the harms, the oppression, in the world and to make the world better. And then, the fifth pursuit is joy. They wanted to be able to name, recognize, understand beauty, and that's a beautiful thing when you think about all the oppression and violence inflicted upon folks during this time period. They still were very intentional about their joy.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

So, I call this model culturally and historically responsive because it extends CRE, culturally relevant teaching, but it connects this beautiful past of American history, of black history, to the present, and through those five pursuits, it helps to cultivate a different type of child, a different type of teacher. And, since teaching and researching, I have seen just higher achievement, more engagement, more excitement to teach, students sort of developing personally and not just academically, because I do work with some students... They do so well academically but they don't know who they are. They have a low sense of self. They have high anxiety if they don't get an A or something like that. You know, I'm trying to teach the whole child.

Eric Neal:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Life is not just about A's. Life is about loving yourself and each other and your joy and learning new things that just gives you joy, not just because it's on the test. You know, I'm trying to teach students there's more than just the test and graduation. There's life.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. I do some work in the state with the universal design for learning and we talk a lot about engagement and creating expert learners, and everything you talked about is... It really is good for the whole student and for all students.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Yeah.

Eric Neal:

It's... You know, a lot of people hear people talking about equity or different things and they want to tune it out or think, "Well, this is only for this group of people." These are great practices for every educator, for every student, to benefit from.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Every human.

Eric Neal:

Yeah.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

I mean, I have seen the model... Doctors thinking about the model in health care. You know, like, do I see myself when I go into doctor's office? Do I feel nervous? Do I feel like I trust all that identity? Do I have health care literacies as skills? Can I read the consent forms and know what I'm reading or do I just sign, which brings in criticality. Do I just sign anything or do I know what's in my medicines? You know, criticality is also like not being passive but just making sure you know what it is. Do I know about...? The intellectualism. Do I know the things my doctor tells me? The language, the treatments, the problems that might be occurring with our health. And, joy. Do I have...? You know, is there joy and beauty that's connected to the conversations we have with our doctors? Or, does it just feel like rigid or disconnected?

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

So, you know, I'm really seeing... I see business folks and arts folks and health care folks... I'm seeing extensions of this work as well.

Eric Neal:

That joy piece is so important. You know, educators have been through the wringer in the last year and a half with having to go remote and try and stay connected with their students and families virtually and then bringing people back and worrying about their health and everything. And, it's a difficult enough job without joy, without that enjoyment of seeing people learn and grow and develop into young critical thinking human beings, it's... Yeah. You have to have the joy. It's a major important part of that.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Absolutely.

Eric Neal:

So, tell us about... You have a couple professional development opportunities that you're partnering with us on here at State Support Team 11. Can you just give us a little preview of what people can look forward to if they sign up?

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Yeah. So, it will capture the essence of Cultivating Genius and the model by engaging educators in genius and joy by first really unpacking who we are and the genius that we come from. I know when we think about history and the historical past, we think of some not so good things that have happened, but there was also triumphs and models of excellence, and so, I'll bring educators into that and explain the need for a change in schools, a need to go beyond skills-based instruction and to teach identity, intellect, criticality, and joy.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

And so, it'll be some historical significance leading to where we are today. I'll introduce educators to the model that I just talked through where they'll get to see some pre-K through 12 examples in mathematics and science and art, physical education, ELA, social studies. That's important because a lot

of people haven't seen enough examples of culturally responsiveness in math, as an example, or science or P.E. And then, they'll learn how to take the model and implement it and practice with it. So, it'll be a nice blend of history, theory, and practice and the practicality of teaching, because if those... If anybody knows me, I like to leave my educators with something that they can use and pick up tomorrow and also with resources that they can read and learn and view.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

And so, one of the resources I'll leave them with is a video of me teaching children where they can see how this model looks in action and they can see the faces of the children, the responses of the children when curriculum and pedagogy is cultivated this way.

Eric Neal:

That's awesome. I'm really looking forward to it. So, if people would like to know more about you and the work that you do and your book, where should they go?

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

So, like I said, I'm at the University of Illinois Chicago, so if anyone is ever studying graduate studies, I'm there to support them. And, I'm also on social media now that the... When the book came out, they told me I need to get Twitter and all of these things. I said okay. I guess it's time. So, you can find me at Gholdy M, which is G-H-O-L-D-Y. M. The letter M. And, I also have a Cultivating Genius page and a website of hillpedagogies.com. So, it probably won't be hard through a Google search since there are not many names like mine. So, I don't think it'll be difficult to find me.

Eric Neal:

Well, thank you so much, Dr. Muhammad. It's been a real pleasure.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad:

Yes. Thank you, Eric.

Eric Neal:

That wraps up this episode of the State Support Team 11 podcast. If you'd like to know more about us and the work that we do here at SST 11 or when Dr. Muhammad's professional development sessions are, go to our website. It's sst11.org. You can reach us by phone at 614-753-4694 or hit us up on Twitter. We're at SST Region One One. If you'd like to get a hold of me, I'm at E-R-I-C dot N-E-A-L at escco.org. Until next time, thanks for listening.