



10 - Keystones: Delving into Black Narratives with Lonnie Firestone (February 2024)

Lonnie Firestone
Founder and Director
Exploring Black Narratives

Sharon Freundel:

I'm Sharon Freundel, Managing Director of the Jewish Education Innovation Challenge (JEIC). Welcome to JEIC's Keystones Podcast Series. The keystone is the central stone at the summit of an arch, locking the whole together. We believe that a strong Jewish Day School education is what holds the Jewish people together as we look towards the next generation.

In today's episode, we will hear from Lonnie Firestone from Exploring Black Narratives on using black narratives as a way for students to grapple with their Jewish identity and connection.

Lonnie Firestone:

Exploring Black Narratives, or EBN, is a curricular program for Jewish middle schools and high schools that engages students in the study of plays by acclaimed black writers. The program is woven into a school's English department and taught collaboratively with an English teacher. The general structure is that we select a play by an accomplished black writer, and we develop a series of class sessions that help students explore the world of the play and the history and culture around it.

We talk about Jewish connections to black storytelling, where we see linkages and differences, and having educators who are both black and Jewish brings these ideas to light and creates eye-opening experiences for students. We also get into the writer's structure, style, and themes through active scene study, and we incorporate an interview and workshop with a professional actor who has performed the play that we're studying. The overall experience is engaging, intellectual, rigorous, never judgmental, but always open to big and interesting ideas.

In just two years of programming and growth, EBN has reached some really significant benchmarks for excellence. We received a Covenant Foundation grant in December 2022 and have received additional grants from UJA Federation of New York and Jews of Color Initiative.



Our programs have served 300 students in the 2022-2023 year. We've worked with 11 day schools nationally, and we're expanding to Canada in the year ahead. Our team has grown to nine, seven of whom are both black and Jewish.

Our goal is to enhance students' engagement in the world through the power of theater study. Jewish students are deeply curious about diversity within Jewish communities and in broader society, but the lack of diversity in day schools creates a hurdle toward that goal. Learning with accomplished black Jewish educators helps students expand their views of Jewish identity and offers a nuanced perspective into the black narratives we study.

Many Jews know about black Jewish partnerships in the civil rights era. And it's a source of pride for so many. It's also a vital aspect of Jewish American citizenship. Though today, many of these relationships feel quite distant, and the tensions between black communities and Jewish communities often feel more pronounced, particularly when there are facets of distance, misunderstanding, accusations of anti-semitism or racism that draw our communities farther apart and create missed opportunities for enhanced understanding, friendships, and deeper connections.

The partnerships that we've built in EBN with several schools tells us that our work has really been meaningful. And the interest that we're seeing from new schools shows that there's a real appetite for substantial programming like this.

An important part of our students' experience is to find a point of intrigue or connection. When we read, we unconsciously ask ourselves how we relate. Do we empathize with certain characters? In this program, we activate that experience and ask outwardly – how do we relate as readers and as Jews? And then where does the story take our hands and lead us to a new place of discovery, where we're not only thinking of our lines of connection, but we're deep into a new area of understanding? How does the writer's perspective on black history and experience give us new insights? What are the points of distinctions and insights that we have on Jewish identity? And how can we learn something new and then reflect back on our own Jewish lives? And think about these really fascinating multi layered points of similarity and distinction. To me that is the most exciting, expansive learning where we're activating an interest and curiosity about the world and thinking of ourselves as close readers of the stories we encounter in the classroom.

We want to be able to have students think about where they love aspects of a story and also take that learning into their wider view of the world around them as Jews and as Americans.

It's been two years, approximately, since the start of our work going to a curricular level of programming, and many people ask how we got started. I started this program in the summer of



2020, first as an extracurricular series with students in theater clubs. In summer 2020, there was a national swell of recognition and attention around how people talk about racial justice. When I saw Jewish day schools having some of those conversations, I thought, “Wow, I’m really, I’m really interested to see what these look like.” And I thought that the arts in particular, especially theater, can be really instructive in how we have formative conversations around it. The reason being that theater is the most dialogue-centered of any storytelling form. It’s not just any mechanism for telling the story. It’s the one that relies the most on speaking. Theater is dialogue, whereas other forms, like novels, TV, and film incorporate dialogue. If we want to hear how people talk, then why don’t we go to the art form in which talking is the central mode of storytelling?

So I contacted a few schools and asked them if they would be interested in the establishment of an extracurricular club for students interested in talking about these ideas, talking about theater, and meeting black artists who had starred in the plays that we study. It started really beautifully, and people took some interest. And then some really amazing transitions happened.

In one case, a teacher sat in on some of the sessions and took an active interest. This was peak Zoom time. This is the pandemic, classes are happening on Zoom, extracurricular clubs are happening on Zoom. So in a way, connecting to students across different cities and states was easier because the whole world was in a virtual space. So I started in this Zoom platform, and when teachers began to sit in on some of the Zoom sessions and take interest in it, it was an easy transition to talk to them about moving from extracurricular to curricular.

With that launchpad, we began to work with more schools, gained recommendations, word of mouth, and begin to connect to a wide array of Jewish day schools of different religious leanings and start to meet students, work with teachers, and enter classrooms, ranging from 7th grade to 12th grade.

Jewish day schools emphasize the dual commitment of Jewish identity, learning, community, skill sets, and knowledge with the values of citizenship, civic engagement, knowledge of oneself as being an American, and affiliation and connection and knowledge with the wider world around them, not just Judaic skill sets, but secular general studies – science, math, social studies, humanities. This program allows students to connect the two, to look at the world around them to engage with beautiful literature, to think of themselves as Jewish readers and as American readers, and to meet artists who are black and Jewish, and black and not Jewish, and talk to them about the narratives they’re reading and how they connect to them.

Measuring the program’s growth is essential. And it’s really an intangible metric to see how students’ hearts and minds are opened. It’s difficult to communicate to a funder or to a prospective school, and, yet, it’s so important. And what I’ve done in many recent schools is set



up a contemplative exercise or a reflection writing as a way for students to look back on the unit while it's still fresh in their minds and to turn over some of the ideas that they have wrestled with or discussed in class sessions. Sometimes the question is, "What are you contemplating as you finish this unit?" And many of the answers are really astounding. We see how students are expanding their perspectives.

Our work is never to convince or to redirect. It's never to align students with a particular ideological viewpoint. But, rather, it's always to expand perspectives. It's always to say, "These stories are fascinating. Let's delve into them and see how you contemplate your thoughts afterwards." So we look to where students' hearts and minds are after these units, based on the reflective writing they do. And in some cases, the teacher will work that into a larger essay or a larger project.

As just one example, in a recent unit in the classroom, we studied a play about the Crown Heights riots of 1991. That play is called *Fires in the Mirror*, and we worked with an Orthodox high school in their 10th grade. It's a really challenging piece, and it deals with some contentious material. So we studied it, not from the perspective of convincing anyone of anything, but rather to look at the narrative at this difficult moment in Jewish history and black history and to see how our lenses widen when we look at how an artist is taking in multiple stories from multiple viewpoints. In their writing exercise that we did at the end, we asked students, "What are you contemplating?," and many said that they were contemplating how they're rethinking their biases, what it means to be a good neighbor, what community means. These reflections were so tremendously rewarding to read. Some of them said they're rethinking what it means to live among neighbors in New York, to think about diverse community and to still maintain Jewish pride. It was just a really astounding area of growth and mature reflection.

When we see these things happen in the classroom, we know that we're creating something really special.

One of the most unique parts about *Exploring Black Narratives* is that it's curated to every classroom. So while we recommend certain texts to many different teachers across many schools, when we actually work on the unit together, it's a unique endeavor that is specifically developed for that teacher style and that student group.

In many Jewish day schools, we see that topics around racial justice are sometimes siloed around holidays like Martin Luther King Day. While the experience of that day in schools is vital and worth maintaining, sometimes it can seem as though those kinds of discussions are specific to one day or one holiday within the year, and, otherwise, the idea of racial justice might feel somewhat removed from the day school environment, that it's not intrinsic to the way we interact with the wider world or with our fellow Jewish community. My perspective is that it doesn't have



to compete with Jewish communal values. In fact, it helps support them because we recognize the dignity in Jews of all races and ethnicities, and we foster cross community respect that is vital for Jews in all of our endeavors.

We can learn a lot from each other by being in conversation with those across communities, as well as within the wide array of Jews in our own communities.

Sharon Freundel:

To find out more about this topic and other ways to catalyze radical improvement in Jewish Day Schools, please visit our website at JewishChallenge.org.