Book Notes

Beyond the Doll Tests: Affirming and Uplifting Black Students' Well-Being

by Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy
Harvard Education Press, March 2026. 235 pp. $37.00 (paperback); $30.00 (e-book).

In 1935, renowned sociologist and civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois proclaimed, "We shall get a finer, better balance of spirit; an infinitely more capable and rounded personality by putting children in schools where they are wanted, and where they are happy and inspired, than in thrusting them into hells where they are ridiculed and hated" (p. 331). Over a century later, educational development and counseling scholar Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy answers Du Bois's call to cultivate humanizing environments in *Beyond the Doll Tests: Affirming and Uplifting Black Students' Well-Being*, which explores how anti-Black racism has shaped Black students' educational and psychological experiences, as well as the interventions and frameworks needed to affirm their humanity. Positioned as a practical guide for new practitioners and educators interested in cultivating culturally responsive and antiracist practices, Holcomb-McCoy's book draws on both research, such as critical race theory, history, and psychology, and her professional experience as a teacher, school counselor, education trainer, and dean to offer insights into how educators might shift away from the deficit-laden perspectives that Black students and their families often encounter. She argues that "Black students and their families deserve to be heard, honored, and respected" by their schools, and that an understanding of how anti-Black racism harms children is a necessary step toward fulfilling this responsibility and creating environments in which Black children may flourish (p. xvii).

Holcomb-McCoy situates this book as a contemporary extension to the "Doll Tests,"[1] a research study conducted in the 1940s by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark that illuminated the harmful effects of racist messaging for Black children that was used as a key argument for the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Despite the case's success in legally desegregating schools, the harm of racial bias persists in schools today, as does the inequality it produces.

Harvard Educational Review Vol. 96 No. 2 Summer 2026
Copyright © by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
DOI: 10.17763/M9F3T7L5N
ISSN 0017-8055 | eISSN 1943-5045
Permissions: harvardeducationalreview.org | hepg@harvard.edu

Downloaded from https://doi.org/10.17763/M9F3T7L5N
by guest on November 17, 2026. Copyright 2026

Part 1 of the book, "Roots of Oppression in Black Communities," begins with chapter 1, "Racism, Trauma, and Education," in which Holcomb-McCoy traces the origins of anti-Blackness to the criminalization of Blackness under chattel slavery, naming the cumulative intergenerational traumas Black communities have endured in the quest for freedom and examining how these histories continue to shape Black students' development and school experiences. She points out that adopting affirming pedagogy is a critical intervention point for "strengthening the protective factors that research shows are vital for Black students' development" (p. 26). Some examples of these practices include affirming positive racial identity, establishing trusting relationships with adults, creating environments that challenge racial bias, and expanding culturally responsive mental health supports.

This practitioner-oriented approach is reinforced through the book's use of case studies and reflection questions that encourage readers to actively engage with the material and consider how these frameworks might be applied in their own settings. One of the case studies in chapter 1 explores the alternative approach a school principal takes to address disciplinary disparities affecting Black boys. Holcomb-McCoy asks readers to examine the forms of individual and systemic racism evident in the case, consider how the case connects to the chapter's broader historical themes, and reflect on how the principal shifted their practices, before asking readers to reflect on what might apply to their own settings.

Chapter 2, "Black Psychology: A Framework for Affirmation," poses "a challenge to the deficit-based models of traditional psychology" and "positions core cultural values such as communalism, spirituality, and self-determination" as part of a central framework for affirming Black youth's brilliance in the classroom (p. 31). Holcomb-McCoy traces Black psychology's origins, outlines three major ideological strands, and presents six guiding tenets for educators, along with a sample classroom activity designed to affirm Black identity.

Part 2, "Interventions That Uplift Black Students' Well-Being," highlights specific actions that educators can take to improve Black students' well-being across four chapters: chapter 3, "Centering Strengths to Affirm Black Students"; chapter 4, "Building Self-Efficacy to Affirm and Empower Black Students"; chapter 5, "A Discipline Alternative—Restorative Justice"; and chapter 6, "Empowering Black Families and Communities."

While *Beyond the Doll Tests* offers a comprehensive set of interventions, chapter 4, on fostering self-efficacy, and chapter 6, on engaging Black families and communities, are particularly illustrative of how Holcomb-McCoy translates these commitments into practice. In chapter 4 she draws on psychologist Albert Bandura's framework of self-efficacy, outlining how students' beliefs in their abilities are shaped through experience, observation, and social feedback. Rather than presenting these concepts abstractly, Holcomb-McCoy grounds them in narratives of Black students' lived experiences, using these stories to illustrate how self-efficacy is cultivated in school contexts. In one example, a

Downloaded from https://doi.org/10.17763/M9F3T7L5N
by guest on November 17, 2026. Copyright 2026

seventh-grade girl attending a predominantly white school improved her math performance after counselors and teachers intentionally affirmed the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) abilities of students of color. As a result, the student became more confident in her academic abilities and participated in more STEM programing.

These examples not only make the framework more accessible for practitioners but also underscore the ways in which educators play a critical role in shaping students' sense of competence and possibility. Notably, Holcomb-McCoy identifies peer mentoring as a valuable resource, suggesting that educators can draw on students' relationships with one another to cultivate self-efficacy, and demonstrates how collaboration can serve as a powerful site of support. Rather than presenting peer mentoring as a general intervention, the author emphasizes culturally responsive student pairings grounded in shared backgrounds and experiences, highlighting the importance of affirmation and belonging for students of color.

In chapter 6, Holcomb-McCoy outlines approaches for meaningfully engaging Black families through school policy, instructional practices, and everyday school culture, while directly challenging deficit-based assumptions that portray Black parents as disengaged from their children's education. She traces the historical roots that have contributed to Black families' limited social capital, constraining both educational access and influence within school systems, before offering concrete interventions implemented across the country to counteract these dynamics and empower families. Importantly, the author also engages in a more nuanced discussion of Black parenting practices—often mischaracterized as "inappropriate"—urging educators to move beyond a white middle-class lens. Taken as a whole, this chapter reframes family engagement as a site of strength rather than deficiency.

Part 3, "Changing Systems of Oppression," then turns to macrolevel systems of change. In chapter 7, "Dismantling Policies That Traumatize Black Youth," Holcomb-McCoy examines five key policy areas that contribute to the ongoing disparities and trauma experienced by Black students: exclusion from gifted and talented programs, disproportionate and inadequate special education services, school policing policies, curricular restrictions, and discrimination based on hairstyle. Rather than offering critique alone, she pairs this analysis with alternative policy directions emphasizing how schools might move toward more equitable outcomes. In chapter 8, "Mental Health Counseling and Care in Schools," the author then highlights how Black students' distress is often overlooked or misinterpreted by educators and mental health providers, particularly when it manifests as behavior that is subsequently disciplined or pathologized. By foregrounding the rising rates of suicidality among Black youth—which was exacerbated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic—Holcomb-McCoy underscores the urgency of culturally responsive mental health supports in schools, including an increased presence of counselors. Chapter 9, "Resistance and Advocacy: The Promise of Healing," then

Downloaded from https://doi.org/10.17763/M9F3T7L5N
by guest on November 17, 2026. Copyright 2026

situates current educational challenges within the longer history of Black collective struggle. Particularly salient in the current political climate is Holcomb-McCoy's call for educators to take up resistance in meaningful ways, such as reexamining noncompliance among families and students as an exercise in autonomy and developing competence in advocacy. She carefully notes that an educator's role is not to "empower" Black students and communities in a paternalistic sense but to act as a thoughtful and responsible partner in that process. The author also seems to assume a level of readiness among educators to take on this work, despite potential professional risks, such as potential job loss, public harassment, and doxing; it is an assumption that feels particularly significant in the current political climate and may both challenge and narrow the audience for the book.

Holcomb-McCoy's *Beyond the Doll Tests* is ultimately convincing in its aim to illuminate and address the persistent inequities shaping Black students' educational experiences—particularly for readers who, like me, have navigated predominantly white educational spaces and can recognize the disparities she names. One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its accessibility: it offers clear actionable recommendations and concrete examples that make abstract concepts legible for practitioners seeking entry points into equity work. In this sense, the book serves as a valuable introductory guide for educators, school leaders, counselors, and policy makers who want to better support Black students but may not know where to begin. At the same time, this book's introductory orientation comes with limitations. While its emphasis on practical application makes the text approachable and easily adaptable for relevant educational contexts, it does not always provide the depth of analysis that readers might seek; there is an emphasis on broad applicability across educational contexts through accessible and actionable recommendations, but this framing leaves less room for sustained engagement with the political and institutional constraints educators may encounter when attempting to implement this work. Discussion of frameworks such as Black psychology, and concepts like cultural humility and spirituality, remain somewhat underconceptualized.

At times, the book also raises questions it does not fully resolve. While Holcomb-McCoy compellingly centers the need to affirm Black students, the discussion tends to focus on those most visibly impacted by inequities, leaving less attention to how educators might support Black students who appear to be succeeding within traditional metrics—such as grades, test scores, or advanced academic placement—yet still experience harm, isolation, or pressure within predominantly white educational spaces. This tension points to a broader issue about how student success is defined and measured within schools. Although Holcomb-Mcoy advocates for broader understandings of success that include identity development, well-being, and social-emotional learning, the book offers less discussion of how educators or institutions might meaningfully assess the dimensions in practice.

Downloaded from https://doi.org/10.17763/M9F3T7L5N
by guest on November 17, 2026. Copyright 2026

Despite these limitations, *Beyond the Doll Tests* remains a valuable contribution for mitigating anti-Black racism in schools. One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its accessibility and practical orientation. Holcomb-McCoy consistently grounds broader discussions of systemic inequity in concrete, real-world examples that make the text approachable for educators, policy makers, school leaders, and counselors who may be engaging with these concepts for the first time. While some concepts and tensions could benefit from deeper engagement, the book succeeds in providing a strong foundation for continued reflection, discussion, and practice within educational spaces.

Brein Y. Mosely
Editor, *Harvard Educational Review*

Note

1. Kenneth and Mamie Clark's (1947) "doll tests," conducted in the 1940s, examined how segregation shaped Black children's racial perceptions and self-image. Black children were presented with dolls that differed primarily by skin tone and were asked questions about which dolls were "nice," "bad," or most resembled themselves. The study became widely known for demonstrating the psychological effects of racism and segregation on Black children and was later cited in *Brown v. Board of Education.*

References

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1935). Does the Negro need separate schools? *The Journal of Negro Education*, *4*(3), 328–335. https://doi.org/10.2307/2291871

Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. P. (1947). Racial identification and preference in Negro children. In T. M. Newcomb & E. L. Hartley (Eds.), *Readings in social psychology* (169–178). New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Downloaded from https://doi.org/10.17763/M9F3T7L5N by guest on November 17, 2026. Copyright 2026

This article has been published by the Harvard Educational Review (ISSN 0017-8055, eISSN 1943-5045) and is intended for personal use only. Posting on public websites or social media, whether in full or in part, is prohibited. However, excerpts of fewer than 400 words total may be quoted with proper citation under HEPG fair use guidelines. Any other use, print or electronic, requires written permission from the Review.

For subscription information, visit **www.harvardeducationalreview.org**. HER is published quarterly by Harvard Education Publishing Group, 8 Story Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, **hepg@harvard.edu**.

Copyright © by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved.

Downloaded from https://doi.org/10.17763/M9F3T7L5N by guest on November 17, 2026. Copyright 2026