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More Than a Single Story: Building Black Excellence in an International School



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Engagement as the Key to Education Transformed

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More Than a Single Story: Building Black Excellence in an International School

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The very first Black Excellence Week (BEW) at the International School of Beijing was held in February 2024. It began in response to community data and observations highlighting a need for greater representation and belonging. Since then, it has grown into something much bigger than we initially imagined: a space for connection, learning, celebration and community.

At the heart of the week is a simple belief: our students deserve more than single stories.

Why This Matters to Us

Iyabo's Why

Growing up in England, I remember Black History Month often focusing heavily on slavery. It was a time when other children would look to me and ask questions that I didn't always have the answers to. I remember thinking, *my history didn't start with slavery*, although I didn't have the words to articulate that at the time.

At home, I was learning a much richer story. I learned about the Kingdom of Benin, Mansa Musa and the Mali Empire, and the histories, achievements and contributions of Black people.

I have always known that our stories must be about more than struggle. They must also celebrate Black joy, excellence, achievement, creativity and contribution.

Years later, when I arrived at the International School of Beijing, our Anti-Bias Anti-Racism data highlighted a need for action, particularly around identity-based harm experienced by Black and Brown students. As Dean of Students, I was often involved when harm had already occurred. But I kept thinking: What are we doing before the harm?

It wasn't enough to respond to racist language and stereotypes after they appeared. We also needed to think about the stories our students were encountering in the first place.

Stacey's Why

I grew up between New York and Connecticut in a mostly Jamaican family. Some of my earliest memories of culture are sensory ones. Sunday mornings had a soundtrack: Beres Hammond. Morgan Heritage. Garnett Silk. Bob Marley. New York expanded my understanding. Harlem itself was a classroom. On 125th Street, I encountered Blackness in all its complexity: African bookstands, cocoa butter vendors, the Nation of Islam and Five Percenters speaking about Black liberation, music, vegan cuisine and health stores, language, community, and resistance. I learned about Marcus Garvey, Malcom X, Frederick Douglass, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison.

Long before I understood terms such as culturally responsive education, identity affirmation, or belonging, I was experiencing them. I carried these cultural treasures with me into all spaces. I knew that Blackness and excellence were never opposites that needed to be reconciled. They belonged together. That knowing eventually led me to Spelman College, an HBCU that was created to counteract the systemic and legal exclusion of Black people from schools and education in the United States. Across these experiences, one belief has remained with me: we cannot separate belonging from knowing that we belong to something.

When children know and celebrate their culture, it affirms who they are. It builds not only individual self-esteem, but a collective sense of worth. We have stories. We have knowledge. We have created. We have contributed. We belong. That collective pride gives us something to stand upon as we learn, grow, imagine, and create.

From Single Stories to Counter-Stories

Our collaboration began through conversations about what we were noticing across the school.

We were seeing students arrive at school carrying stereotypes about Black and Brown people from social media, films, games, books and the wider world. Those messages were sometimes reflected in the language students used and, more concerningly, in how they interacted with Black and Brown peers and teachers.

We started asking each other questions:

What messages are our students receiving about Black people?

Whose stories are missing?

What images are we placing in front of children?

And how can we challenge stereotypes proactively rather than only responding after harm has occurred?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's concept of "the danger of a single story" helped us make sense of what we were seeing. When children repeatedly encounter negative narratives about a group of people, those narratives can become the lens through which they understand the entire group. For us, this highlighted the importance of intentionally creating counter-stories—stories that challenge harmful and inaccurate narratives by centering the richness, diversity, joy, creativity, excellence, and everyday experiences of the diversity of Black people. We wanted our students not simply to challenge stereotypes, but to encounter a fuller and more affirming understanding of Black identities and experiences.

Counter-storytelling offered another possibility. Drawing on Sarfo-Mensah's (2024) discussion of counter-stories, we recognised the importance of moving beyond simply challenging negative narratives about Black people. His words resonated deeply with us: "Regardless of how we engage in the art of counter-storytelling in our classrooms, our mission must be the same, "Teach our students the truth about who they are and how they should be seen by others in this world." This became central to our thinking. We wanted to intentionally centre stories of Black joy, excellence, creativity, identity, and possibility, giving students opportunities to encounter richer, more affirming representations of Black lives—past and present.

Rather than allowing Black identity to be framed predominantly through racism, oppression or struggle, we wanted our students to encounter stories of Black joy, creativity, innovation, achievement, culture and possibility and we wanted that story to be curated and told from an authentic African Diasporic lens.

And so Black Excellence Week was born.

Creating Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Doors

Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's concept of mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors became central to our thinking.

We wanted Black students to see themselves reflected with dignity and pride. We wanted other students to have windows into lives and experiences different from their own. And we wanted everyone to have opportunities to step through those doors—to become curious, engage and build connection.

BEW Exhibition

Our art exhibition became an important part of this work - the first exhibition, *Window Into the World*, explored the breadth of the African Diaspora. Artwork, photography, clothing and cultural artefacts represented identities and experiences spanning Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and beyond. These were artifacts that were near and dear to our ISB community as a call for community contributions was made.



At the first BEW Exhibition, we featured local Black Eritrean artist Martha Waldo, who has called Beijing home for over 20 years. She led engaging workshops with our students, sharing her artistic practice, creative process, and experiences as an artist in Beijing.



The following year, We Create Our Stories explored the relationship between art, memory and storytelling. Students, educators, artists and community members contributed artwork, poetry, cultural artefacts, and personal stories. An interactive historical storytelling listening and viewing display captured authentic story telling from around the diaspora; Mali, Cuba, and from the Gullah Geechee Storytellers of South Carolina, USA.



Our featured artist was Fénia G, an American multi-creative who explored writing, visual art and performance with our students. Along with Temitayo Adegboyega, a Nigerian filmmaker, writer, and co-founder of Limecut Studios in Shanghai, who shared his magnificent film making skills and the art of storytelling behind the lens with our students.

With the support of Joseph Stewart, our High School Art Teacher, the exhibitions have been a huge success. During the two weeks they are on display, classes visit the exhibition to engage with the artwork, explore the stories behind each piece, and celebrate the creativity and perspectives of Black artists. Guests from outside the school also attend. This work would not have been possible without the dedication of an incredible team of Black educators who formed the Black Excellence Week committee, generously committing their time and expertise. Kathlyn Paananen, our DEI Leader at the time, was also a true ally and advocate. Furthermore, our leadership team championed our vision, providing essential funding, dedicating time in the school calendar, and attended the events—including our Head of School, who delivered opening remarks at both exhibitions.





In our first year, a Black parent from Guangzhou happened to be visiting our school for his child's game while the exhibition was on display. He later shared with our High School Principal that he was nearly moved to tears, as he had never seen Black identity, culture, and excellence celebrated in this way within an international school community.



In its second year, we had the honor of welcoming His Excellency Ambassador Bernard Williams of the Jamaican Embassy, to open the exhibition and reinforce an important message; "There is power in telling our own stories and ensuring they are remembered, preserved, and not erased."



But Black Excellence Week was never intended to be simply an exhibition.

Classrooms became spaces for learning and discussion. Students shared their talents. Families contributed their cultures and stories. Black educators and community members became visible as storytellers and role models in classrooms. Over the past two years, our students have had opportunities to explore a wide range of creative and cultural experiences, including African drumming, jewelry making, dance, Capoeira, and creative writing, to name just a few. These experiences have connected our students with Black creatives from across China, allowing them to learn directly from their artistry, knowledge, and lived experiences.



Gradually, something shifted.

Each year, the week has grown in both reach and impact, supported by our Black educators, families, and the wider community. What began as something we created for our community has gradually become something our community wants to create with us.

We want to thank everyone who contributed as part of the Black Excellence Week Committee: Jody Belcon, Tamesha Cary, Daniel Chaney, Kiki Davenport, Sesame Fraiser, Khamisa Haugen, Melissa Holmes, Jeff Idigo, Brandi Kelley and Ryan Mutungira.



What We Have Learned

Perhaps our biggest learning has been that people want to see themselves in their school community.

We have watched Black students recognise themselves in artwork and stories and share connections with pride. We have seen Black families walk through the school with their children and experience their identities being celebrated simply because their cultures and stories are worthy of celebration.

We have also watched students and adults from many different backgrounds become curious about stories they had never encountered before.

That matters.

> *Because representation is not simply about what hangs on a wall or appears in a curriculum. It is about what those choices communicate about whose knowledge matters, whose stories belong and who gets to be seen in the fullness of their humanity.*

Black Excellence Week has also reminded us that this work cannot live within one week.

We still need to respond when identity-based harm occurs. We still need to examine our curriculum, our systems, our language and our own biases. Celebration does not replace accountability.

But there is something powerful about not allowing harm to become the only time we talk about identity.

For us, Black Excellence Week is an intentional counter-story.

It says that Black history did not begin with slavery.

That Black identity is not defined by racism.

That Black children deserve more than narratives of overcoming.

Their stories are also stories of joy, brilliance, creativity, culture, innovation, love and belonging. And perhaps that is the invitation for all educators: to look around our own communities and ask, "Whose stories are our students hearing? Whose stories are missing? And what might become possible if we intentionally made space for more?"

That is the work we began in 2023. And increasingly, it no longer feels like something that belongs to us. It belongs to the community.

For educators and school leaders seeking to implement similar initiatives, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Start with data and listen to your community. Let observations, student experiences, and identity-based harm data guide your vision rather than assumptions.

2. Center counter-stories, not just struggle. Ensure Black identity is celebrated through joy, creativity, excellence, and achievement - not solely through narratives of oppression.

3. Build collaboratively, not unilaterally. Invite Black educators, families, and community members to co-create and lead. This work belongs to the community, not to a single committee.

4. Pair celebration with accountability. A celebratory week does not replace the ongoing work of examining curriculum, systems, language, and bias. Both are necessary.

A Sneak Peek at What's Next

We're excited about what's ahead, so lookout for what comes next! Because for us, this is more than work - it is personal. It is a commitment to ensuring that our students experience the representation, affirmation, and joy that we know matters. Every child deserves to see Black identity celebrated through joy, creativity, excellence, and possibility.

Next year will mark our third Black Excellence Week, and we have already begun brainstorming how to make it even more meaningful. As the week continues to grow, we are intentionally centering student voice and inviting greater participation from our families and wider community in shaping what comes next. Our theme for next year is: Centered: Black Artists, Black Stories, Black Excellence.



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Iyabo Tinubu *is an international educator and school leader from the UK, with extensive experience across the UK, China, Singapore, and Germany. She currently serves as the Founding Elementary Dean of Students at the International School of Beijing, where she leads work focused on student wellbeing, behaviour systems, belonging, restorative practice, and student leadership, while partnering with educators and families to strengthen inclusive school culture.*

Iyabo's work is grounded in the belief that belonging, representation, and high-quality teaching are central to student success. Drawing on her experience as a classroom teacher, team leader, DEIJ leader, and student advocate, she is particularly interested in culturally responsive practice, teacher development, inclusive leadership, and creating systems that enable both students and educators to thrive.

A committed lifelong learner, Iyabo is currently completing an MA in Educational Leadership in Practice at the University of Manchester. She is also trained in restorative practices, intercultural development, safeguarding, and teacher supervision and evaluation. Beyond her school-based work, she contributes to the wider international education community through professional learning, accreditation, DEIJ initiatives, and advocacy for more inclusive and representative international schools.

***StaceyAnn Palma** is an educator, instructional coach, and SEL leader whose work is grounded in the belief that foundational teaching and learning should be rigorous, engaging, joyful, and deeply responsive to who children are. With more than two decades in education, her perspective has been shaped by her home and professional experiences across New York and Connecticut, and internationally in Japan and China. Her career has spanned early childhood and elementary teaching, teacher mentorship, curriculum leadership, SEL leadership, and instructional coaching.*

StaceyAnn's work sits at the intersection of teaching and learning, Social Emotional Learning, Social and Cultural Competencies, and educational equity. She believes SEL cannot be meaningfully taught without attention to social justice, racial justice, identity, culture, and the other intersections that shape how children experience school and the world. For her, belonging extends beyond helping children feel welcome; it requires educators to consider whose identities, histories, voices, and ways of knowing are centered and affirmed within learning spaces. As an Instructional Coach, StaceyAnn approaches coaching as a partnership that builds educators' thinking capacity rather than simply providing solutions, strengthening Tier 1 teaching while maintaining an intentional equity and access lens.

A History graduate of Spelman College, with a focus on African and Caribbean history, StaceyAnn brings a historical and cultural lens to her work. Her experiences across cultures have strengthened her belief that classrooms are not culturally neutral spaces. At the heart of her practice is a commitment to learning environments where rigor, identity, critical thinking, innovation, creativity, equity, access, belonging, and joy are interconnected and where children and adults see themselves as thinkers, knowledge holders, and contributors.

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