



# Embracing Genius and Joy: Unveiling the HILL Model for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy



Amber Smith, Rachelle Johnson, Dr. Ardrea Lambeth Smith

Published by K20 Center

*This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)*

**Time Frame** 110

## Essential Question(s)

How can educators intentionally incorporate students' cultural identities and life experiences into the curriculum to foster joy, engagement, and academic excellence?

## Summary

This professional development addresses the essential question, "How can educators intentionally incorporate students' cultural identities and life experiences into the curriculum to foster joy, engagement, and academic excellence?" During this session, participants will explore the importance of recognizing students' genius and cultivating joy, critically evaluate systemic barriers in education, and learn how to apply decolonizing strategies using the HILL Model created by Dr. Ghody Muhammad. Attendees will use the groundbreaking HILL Model framework to develop a lesson outline that integrates its five pursuits: Identity, Skill, Intellect, Criticality, and Joy. By the end of this professional development session, participants will be equipped with actionable tools and strategies to create equity-focused learning spaces that honor the lived experiences and brilliance of all students.

## Learning Goals

- Understand the significance of recognizing genius and incorporating joy in learning.
- Critique the education system by assessing its current effectiveness of embodying joy.
- Using the HILL Model, create a lesson outline integrating the five pursuits.

## Standards

*InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards (K-12th)*

**2k:** The teacher knows how to access information about the values of diverse cultures and communities and how to incorporate learners' experiences, cultures, and community resources into instruction.

**2n:** The teacher makes learners feel valued and helps them learn to value each other.

**4m:** The teacher knows how to integrate culturally relevant content to build on learners' background knowledge.

## Attachments

- [I Used to Think...But Now I Know—Embracing Genius and Joy.docx](#)
- [I Used to Think...But Now I Know—Embracing Genius and Joy.pdf](#)
- [Lesson Outline—Embracing Genius and Joy.docx](#)
- [Lesson Outline—Embracing Genius and Joy.pdf](#)
- [Magnetic Statements—Embracing Genius and Joy.docx](#)
- [Magnetic Statements—Embracing Genius and Joy.pdf](#)
- [Presentation Slides—Embracing Genius and Joy.pptx](#)
- [The HILL Model—Embracing Genius and Joy.docx](#)
- [The HILL Model—Embracing Genius and Joy.pdf](#)
- [The Warmth of Other Suns Synopsis—Embracing Genius and Joy.docx](#)
- [The Warmth of Other Suns Synopsis—Embracing Genius and Joy.pdf](#)

## Materials

- Presentation Slides (attached)
- Magnetic Statements document (attached; one set per session)
- HILL Model handout (attached; one per participant)
- The Warmth of Other Suns Synopsis document (attached; one per session)
- Lesson Outline handout (attached; one per participant)
- I Used to Think...But Now I Know handout (attached; one half-page per participant)
- Sticky notes (optional)
- Paper (optional)
- Coloring utensils (optional)

20 minutes

## Engage

### Facilitator's Note: Session Preparation

Prior to the session, print out one set of the **Magnetic Statements** document. Hang up the images around the room. Depending on the size of your session group, you may need to print more than one set.

Use the attached **Presentation Slides** to guide the professional development session. Display **slide 2** and introduce the title of the session. Transition to **slide 3** and invite participants to read the quote. Have one participant from each table write the quote on a piece of paper.

Initiate the [Chain Notes](#) activity by having participants pass their paper to another participant and have that participant respond to the quote by adding a sentence or phrase that relates to the quote. Repeat the process, having each new participant build on the others' comments until the paper returns to its original owner. Invite one representative from each table to share out highlights of their Chain Notes. Explain to participants how this quote emphasizes the significance of culturally relevant teaching and the impact that it has on learners.

Show **slide 4** and introduce the [Magnetic Statements](#) instructional strategy. Draw participants' attention to the various images around the room that embody traditional cultural meals. Invite participants to study each image then stand by the one that most attracts them. Encourage participants to share the reasoning behind their selection with the others gathered around the same image. Have each group select a spokesperson to share out their reasoning for selecting that image.

### Facilitator's Note: Images

These images are intended to cultivate personal connections between the participants and the lesson, but should also cultivate relationships between the participants. Ideally, participants will experience a sense of commonality and joy while sharing their cultural or familial ties to the image.

Display **slides 5-6** and introduce the essential question and learning objectives.

20 minutes

## Explore

Display **slide 7** and introduce participants to Dr. Gholdy Muhammad. Tell participants that she is the creator of the HILL Model, which can be used to create culturally responsive lessons.

Transition to **slide 8** and introduce the term “genius.” Invite participants to share their thoughts about the meaning of the term. Discuss their interpretations then display **slide 9** and share Dr. Muhammad’s perspective on genius.

Transition to **slide 10** and introduce the term “joy.” Invite participants to share their thoughts about the meaning of the term. Discuss their interpretations then display **slide 11** and share Dr. Muhammad’s perspective on joy.

Display **slide 12** and introduce participants to the [Round Robin](#) instructional strategy. Lead participants in the activity on the slide by introducing the prompt and having them provide short responses to the prompt without further elaboration in small groups. Allow no more than two minutes for them to discuss the prompt in their groups.

### Facilitator’s Note: Discussion Format

Depending on the number of participants, you may choose to discuss the prompt as a whole group rather than in small groups. This may be an informal discussion where participants are allowed to quickly shout out answers.

Display **slide 13** and invite participants to answer the questions on the slide based on their responses from the Round Robin activity. Allow participants to elaborate on these answers.

35 minutes

## Explain

Transition to **slide 14** and introduce the HILL model. Distribute one copy of the **HILL Model** handout to each participant and allow them time to review the components of the model. Display **slide 15** and introduce participants to the [GramIt](#) instructional strategy. Have participants draw or find an image that represents their understanding of the HILL Model, then have them summarize the HILL model using one hashtag. Invite participants to share their images and hashtags.

Display **slide 16** and invite participants to share their understanding of the term “harvest.” Introduce the definition on the slide and share the quote from Dr. Muhammad. Ask participants how the HILL Model could best be used in their learning spaces to produce a harvest. Transition to **slide 17** and explain to participants that they should now create a lesson outline using the five pursuits of the HILL Model. Review the components of the HILL Model as listed on the slide.

Show **slides 18–19** and introduce participants to an example of the HILL Model used with a middle school social studies lesson. Review each component of the model as it relates to the Three Sisters planting technique.

Display **slides 20–21** and introduce participants to an example of the HILL Model used with a high school English Language Arts lesson. Use the attached **The Warmth of Other Suns Synopsis** document to summarize the book *The Warmth of Other Suns* for participants. Review each component of the model as it relates to the work.

After reviewing the components of the model, invite participants to work as a group to brainstorm different projects and assignments that could fit within each pursuit for the lesson.

### Facilitator’s Note: Groups

If your participant group is large, organize participants into smaller groups and assign each group one pursuit. Have each group design an alternate assignment related to their assigned pursuit while ensuring that it still aligns with the learning objectives.

30 minutes

## Extend

Transition to **slide 22**. Distribute one copy of the **Lesson Outline** handout to each participant. Have participants create or modify a lesson to incorporate the HILL model. You may have participants work alone or with a partner.

Allow participants 25 minutes to work, then invite them to share their lessons with the group.

15 minutes

## Evaluate

Distribute one copy of the **I Used to Think...But Now I Know** handout to each participant. Display **slide 23** and introduce participants to the [I Used To Think...But Now I Know](#) instructional strategy. Allow participants time to complete the handout then invite individuals to share out.

## Research Rationale

Dr. Ghody Muhammad's HILL Model, introduced in *Cultivating Genius* (2020) and *Unearthing Joy* (2023), is vital for fostering culturally and historically responsive teaching and learning in classrooms. Culturally responsive pedagogy, as explained by Dr. Geneva Gay, involves leveraging the cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students to enhance teaching (Shaw, 2022). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, a teaching method coined by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by incorporating cultural references into the curriculum, making them integral elements of learning rather than mere tools to explain the dominant culture (Shaw, 2022). While Gay focuses on practical strategies for implementing culturally responsive teaching, Ladson-Billings highlights the critical importance of social justice, addressing inequities, and validating students' cultural identities. Her framework is a transformative practice that leads to liberation, action, and social change toward justice (Sellers & Mackenzie, 2024). The HILL Model combines these approaches, focusing on five pursuits: identity, skills, intellect, criticality, and joy, which represent the ultimate goals of teaching and learning (Degener, 2023). The model expands on these frameworks by integrating practices that center historically marginalized voices, fostering a sense of belonging and agency among students. Additionally, teaching with joy promotes resilience and emotional well-being, particularly in classrooms affected by systemic injustices. Muhammad's model addresses both academic and socio-emotional needs, ensuring holistic educational experiences that empower students to thrive academically and socially.



## Resources

Degener, S., Garcia, A., Sitkoski, I., & Mireles, M. (2023). Professional development: Reading, writing, and comprehending in a culturally responsive teaching world. *Illinois Reading Council Journal*, 51(3). 39–43. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.33600/IRCJ.51.3.2023.39>

HILL pedagogies. (n.d.). <https://hillpedagogies.com/>

K20 Center. (n.d.). Chain notes. Strategies. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/52>

K20 Center. (n.d.). GramIt. Strategies. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/2554>

K20 Center. (n.d.). I used to think . . . but now I know. Strategies. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/137>

K20 Center. (n.d.). Magnetic statements. Strategies. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/166>

K20 Center. (n.d.). Round robin. Strategies. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/778>

Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic.

Muhammad, G. (2023). *Unearthing joy: A guide to culturally and historically responsive literacy education*. Scholastic.

Sellers, K. M. & MacKenzie, A. H. (2024). Looking back to move forward: Exploring urban secondary education teacher perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. *Education and Urban Society*, 56(3), 263–285. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1177/00131245221121668>

Shaw, J. T. (2022). Culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogies: An introduction to seminal contributions and selected empirical studies in choral singing. *Choral Journal*, 63(5), 51–56.