

NYREE CLAYTON-TAYLOR
2019 KENTUCKY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
TEACHER OF THE YEAR



“If a student doesn’t feel safe and secure in your classroom they are not going to perform. You have to teach the whole child.”

Teaching predominately African American students in West Louisville, NyRee Clayton-Taylor recognized symptoms of suffering - anger and lashing out, or withdrawal and not doing the work. Kids would tell her about an uncle who was shot, a father lost to gun

violence, parents in prison. Some couldn’t find words to express themselves.

In a nationally represented survey, 8.2 percent of all children, from age 2-17, were reported to have witnessed gun violence or heard gunshots in their communities. Youth ages 14-17 had the highest exposure at nearly 17 percent.

So, Clayton-Taylor, a resource teacher at Wheatley Elementary School, created a curriculum around their joys in life, their interests, their culture. Her energy, creativity and impact earned her recognition as the 2919 Kentucky Elementary School Teacher of the Year.

“Academics will not happen if a student is not healed,” she said. “I decided to infuse academics with healing so they could get it at one time.”

Source: Finkelhor D, Turner HA, Shattuck A, Hamby SL. Prevalence of Childhood Exposure to Violence, Crime, and Abuse: Results from the National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence. JAMA Pediatr. 2015;169(8):746–754. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2015.0676

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2344705>

Her solution was to use hip hop, the popular music genre especially among African American youth, as a primary teaching tool, along with rap, graffiti artwork, and books about African American history and culture to help children focus, write, create, work in teams, and solve problems, all beneficial lifelong skills.

A study published in 2019 of 640 children ages 2-17 in urban areas of Philadelphia and Boston and in rural eastern Tennessee, found that 41% had seen gun violence or heard gunshots, and 32% had been exposed in the previous year. Among exposed youth, 50% took protective action to keep themselves safe and 58% reported being very or extremely afraid, sad or upset as a result of the indirect gun violence.

Source: Mitchell, K. J., Jones, L. M., Turner, H. A., Beseler, C. L., Hamby, S., & Wade, R. (2019). Understanding the Impact of Seeing Gun Violence and Hearing Gunshots in Public Places: Findings from the Youth Firearm Risk and Safety Study. Journal of Interpersonal Violence.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519853393>

“I had to bring in hip hop. It was a must so that they could have a narrative that was their own,” said Clayton-Taylor, now in her 20th year of teaching.

“The hip hop and the books related to them. It was a game changer in my classroom.”

Students walked on a red carpet into the writing lab she taught at Wheatley, like they might at a televised music awards show.

Children want to talk about what is happening in their community including gun violence and “I don’t move away from that.” Last year students produced a project entitled “Using the Power of Music to Fight Gun Violence.”

Clayton-Taylor, who grew up in West Louisville, said her background made her aware of the kinds of challenges facing her students. “I knew what was going on.”

She is optimistic for her students but worries about students who do not have a consistent nurturing adult in their lives. She praises Jefferson County Public Schools for providing mental health counselors in schools and supports more teacher training to address diverse student populations.

Teachers have a full plate and “kids dealing with trauma are very needy,” she said. “We have to provide a way for students to understand their resilience.”

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Crime statistics in this report are from the Louisville Metropolitan Police Department Uniform Crime Report dated Oct. 9, 2019, the LMPD Gunshot Report from Jan. 1-Sept. 30, 2019, and in response to open records requests. Numbers of shootings reflect homicides by gunfire and non-fatal criminal shootings.