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### Interview with Bettina Love: Creating Spaces That Matter

Meca Williams-Johnson

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## Interview with Bettina Love: Creating Spaces That Matter

### Abstract

This is an interview with Dr. Bettina Love on her work with the Kindezi Schools, a small, high-performing charter group in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Love's thought provoking responses provide insight into the dynamics that make Kindezi Schools successful at reaching their students. Additionally, she shares concerns about the dilemma of Opportunity School Districts (OSD) and the schism OSD's create in minority communities. Lastly, she shares how Kindezi became an opportunity school for Atlanta youth. This interview will be beneficial for parents, principals, teachers, and stakeholders who are interested in understanding how and why creating spaces to nurture student learning matters.

### Keywords

Bettina Love, hip hop education, charter schools, opportunity school districts

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## Interview with Bettina Love: Creating Spaces That Matter

**Meca Williams-Johnson**  
Georgia Southern University

I have never encountered any children in any group who are not geniuses. There is no mystery on how to teach them. The first thing you do is treat them like human beings and the second thing you do is love them. (Asa Hilliard as cited in Atwater, Russell, & Butler, 2014, p. 3)

Like most interviews, this one with Dr. Bettina Love is clear and precise on her work with students and why she has been an educator for over 15 years. However, what makes this interview dramatically distinct is the content matter, specifically, the dilemma on creating spaces that matter for our children and who may be best equipped to create that space. This interview describes how Dr. Love arrived at the Kindezi School, a small high-performing charter group in Atlanta, Georgia and sheds light on her position regarding opportunity school districts and what schools should provide for students and communities.

Especially important about this interview is the emphasis on love and hip hop. Her descriptions personify grace and honor beyond any perceptions one might have of the VH1 television reality show. She has been an elementary classroom teacher and college professor influenced by Asa Hilliard (quoted above) and his teachings on love and learning. Dr. Love educates us on how hip hop can influence, engage and motivate kids and how loving each child is foundational to reaching students. Now more than ever, young people from diverse backgrounds are turning

to hip hop culture to explain the world around them. Educators like Dr. Love embrace these practices and challenge notions of texts, tests, and typical school days as relevant ways to engage kids.

### BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Bettina Love is an Associate Professor of Educational Theory & Practice at the University of Georgia. The focus of her work is on adolescent development, specifically how adolescents negotiate hip hop music and culture to form social, cultural, and political identities. She also investigates adolescents' understanding of social justice. She concentrates on transforming urban classrooms through the use of hip hop curricula and classroom structures. In 2015, Dr. Love was named the Nasir Jones Fellow at the W. E. B. Du Bois Research Center at Harvard University; she completed her fellowship at Harvard during Spring, 2016.

Dr. Love is a dynamic public speaker on a range of topics including hip hop education, Black girlhood, queer youth, hip hop feminism, art-based education to foster youth civic engagement, and issues of diversity. In 2014, she was invited to the White House *Research Conference on Girls* to discuss her work focused on the lives of Black girls. She has also provided expert commentary for various news outlets including *National Public Radio*, *The Guardian*, and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Dr. Love is the founder of *Real Talk: Hip Hop Education for Social Justice*, an after-school



initiative that uses a project-based learning approach to teach elementary students the history and elements of hip hop for social justice. To better illustrate her work with youth, she wrote the book, *Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South* (2012). Her work has also appeared in numerous books and journals, including *Urban Education*, *The Urban Review*, and *Journal of LGBT Youth*.

### **HIP HOP EDUCATION AND CHARTER SCHOOLS**

The conversation on hip hop and education emphasizes the dissonances that exist between the school experience and the social reality students live (Childers, 2016; Emdin, 2016; Hill, 2009; Low, 2011; Prier, 2011; Seidel, 2011). Contributing to the conversation, Dr. Bettina Love shares how schools miss a critical opportunity to engage our youth by overlooking hip hop, which is a space in which students may feel empowered. In her book *Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak* (2012), Dr. Love explores how young high school girls develop ideas about race, body, class, inequality, and privilege. Methodically connecting lyrics, social realities, and schooling experiences, she identifies that schools need to reimagine and revive educational practices and that hip hop offers viable solutions.

In creating a space for students to take part in a unique schooling experience, Dr. Love worked with others to develop the Kindezi Schools. Emphasizing love for each student in conjunction with a hip hop infused curriculum creates an intellectual and socio-political space that encourages students and increases discussion. The Kindezi Schools have taken Atlanta by surprise with student achievement and school success. The original West Lake location, opened in 2010, scored in the 99th percentile of all charter schools in Georgia and earned 5 stars on School Climate ratings. In addition, the Kindezi School at West Lake was recognized as a High Progress Reward School (in the top 10% of Title I schools in the state) by

the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE, 2015). The Kindezi School at Old Fourth Ward opened in 2015, and a third location will be opening in the Atlanta area in 2017.

There are outspoken and polarizing positions about charter schools like Kindezi. As an educational venture and experiment, charters are producing extraordinary results. However, researchers argue the test scores of traditional public schools consistently outperform charter schools nationwide in reading, math proficiency, and SAT and ACT scores (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2012). Despite the trend showing public schools outperform charter schools on standardized tests, a more refined analysis reveals that factors such as student demographics, grade level, subjects, and state policies contribute to determining charter schools' performance. Studies also suggest that low-income and low-achieving middle school students attending charter schools perform better in mathematics than similar students in traditional public schools (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2012). Additionally, proponents of charter schools highlight the need for charters to address issues of inequity and provide a space to capture the attention of those who have been left behind (Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, & Witte, 2012). This is the intersection where Kindezi resides. On the one hand, it provides a creative space for students in grades K–8 to have access to a highly qualified teacher who is prepared to give and receive them in love; in addition, the teachers at the Kindezi School are prepared to use unconventional strategies and music to capture their imagination. On the other hand, Kindezi is a real charter school that uses corporate funds and has become a vehicle resembling a takeover community school. Having to reconcile these two perspectives is extremely complicated. In this interview conducted on October 6, 2016, Dr. Bettina Love explains navigating within this difficult intersection.

*When you were working on your Ph.D., how did you envision you would use your degree or influence? What were your goals?*

When I really started to figure this thing out and understand the publishing, the research, the service, the presentations, it was overwhelming at a certain point. What really got me driven and focused was that I was focused on one thing, and that was hip hop education. And all that work, of reading and writing, really prepared me to say okay, where is the gap in the field? And I think when I realized the gaps in the field of hip hop education, I got even more excited and even more laser focused. So what I mean by that, there was no one really thinking about hip hop education with an elementary focus. There were no books at the time other than Ruth Decole's book on hip hop and black girls. So when I started to think about who I was, and things that were important to me, and how they were just missing from the literature, that really drove me, it kept me focused. Like I'm not here, black women, I'm queer and I'm not here, black girls, not here, I'm an elementary school teacher, I'm not here in the literature, so those were the driving things that kept me really focused because I knew what the literature said and what it didn't say and I wanted to fill in those gaps in some type of way.

*How did you make your introduction to Kindezi?*

That's a great story. The executive director of Kindezi, his name is Dean Leeper. Dean Leeper was also a Ph.D. student at Georgia State when I was a Ph.D. student at Georgia State. We were teaching assistants together; we both had taken classes with Asa Hilliard, and Dr. Hilliard had made such an impact on us. One day Dean was talking to Asa Hilliard, and he had this idea about small schools and community schools, the child comes first, and multidimensional ways of learning, and Asa Hilliard looked at Dean and said that's called Kindezi and he referred

Dean to this book. Now at the same time I'm working on my hip hop stuff, Dean decides to drop out of the Ph.D. program and starts teaching refugees, and I stayed in the Ph.D. I finished up my Ph.D., then Dean says to me, hey, we worked well together. What do you think about being on the board of this charter school? Called, of course where he got the name from Asa Hilliard, Kindezi. And from that, we've been rocking ever since.

You know now, we, the school, we are in our sixth year. I was on the board when we were just in like a room in the basement of a high school and in community colleges trying to think and formulate these things, and now to see that we're two schools going to three schools next year is just absolutely amazing. I've just been driven by, number one, knowing where Kindezi's mission came from, knowing that the school's name was given to us by Asa Hilliard. And number two, our commitment to small classrooms, our commitment to racially diverse and economically diverse communities, our commitment to teachers; it's just something that I'm really proud of, the work that we do at Kindezi. Our commitment to high quality teaching, small classrooms, and really trying to move students not only intellectually, but emotionally. So we talk a lot about love at Kindezi and that comes straight from all of what Dr. Hilliard talked to us about; if you love on a child, if you see the genius in a child, you will get results. And you know, we really try our best and it's hard as you scale up and you grow more schools to really, like, envision that and scale that up for 700 kids, right. Love, love, love, high expectations, love, but it's a task that has been difficult; it's hard, but we're getting results. And you know we're making small strides in the right direction that we're very proud of.

*So this brings me to my next question, in terms of your teachers. So how do you get your teachers to see that vision, especially in this age of accountability and high stakes testing, to*

*accept a different expectation and understand the building of the foundation of love?*

I would say what made us amazing our first three or four years at Kindezi, when we were just trying to figure things out, we gave our teachers our vision, we set high expectations, and we supported our teachers. Some of our most amazing teachers took that and ran with it in ways we couldn't even imagine. We had one teacher, her name is Sharon (pseudonym); now Sharon was also one of my students at Georgia State when I was finishing up my Ph.D. there. Sharon would do something; she would read spooky stories to the kids and then she would scare them to no end. We had, right before GIFs came out, she had a scary picture and the students didn't know pictures could move yet. And so she had a story, was reading a spooky story, then showed them a picture, and the picture moved and the kids screamed. Also, Sharon told them one day they're in trouble, like trouble, and she wanted them to go outside, and when they got outside, it was nothing but teachers standing there with water balloons. We, you know, we try to create, that school, we share spontaneous joy. We expect the teachers to do silly, crazy, fun things. We want those kids to come to school and have no clue what's going to happen today.

The students and teachers anticipate different things. The message is to students that you're going to learn but you're going to have some fun, and, at Kindezi, we have spontaneous dance. So at any time during the day, a teacher will go on the intercom and start playing Nae Nae [name of a dance song], and tell all the kids to stop what they're doing right then and just get it in. Just dance. We've had parties where it's just turn all the lights off and hundreds of glow sticks and it's a glow stick party. So we try to get kids to understand, like you want to come here, this is fun, you never know what's going to happen. And just, and still having high expectations. So this idea that this could

be your place that's fun, that you find joy, that you love coming to, where these teachers care about you, and they push you to be better. On top of that we also have, every Wednesday, we have professional development for teachers.

*Weekly professional development for teachers?*

Yeah, every week, and we talk about using data to drive test scores, how do we talk about these data, and we just implemented this year restorative justice practices in the classroom. So not only do we want to push the students to be better, but we know we must make sure the teachers are high quality teachers. We also have what we call a teacher promotion ladder where we have teachers of distinction. And so we had at each school about six to eight teachers that got anywhere between an \$8,000 and \$10,000 dollar raise.

*Impressive raise?*

They are worth it, we have teachers of distinction; and we are always trying to find new and creative ways to, number one, attract high quality teachers, and then, number two, to retain high quality teachers with promotion salaries, incentives, professional development, and classroom support. We are one of the first charter school districts that has its own social and emotional chief officer. So really focused on, you can have the best curriculum, you can have the best teachers, but when you have young folk and babies that are in trauma and have emotional needs, all that stuff goes out the door.

So we're really focused on the social and emotional learning of our teachers to be able to understand the social and emotional learning of our students, and so we think that is key to their success. So this year is our first year of having a social-emotional officer and really trying to keep kids in the classroom, in the school, but not just keep them there but get them well. And get

them thinking about their emotions, meditating on their emotions, and understanding why they feel the way they feel. We think that social-emotional is very important, and that's one of the things that I think we are really working hard on, and the teachers see us working hard on it because they know that they have some babies in the classroom that they just can't reach. They don't have time to reach, they don't have the training to reach, and a lot of it is not a capacity issue. You know that's one thing Asa Hilliard always told us, it's not a capacity issue; these babies have the capacity to put in whatever you put in them, but it's really about can we get them there feeling safe, feeling loved, feeling encouraged, emotionally and socially ready to learn. And then once you do that, the sky's the limit. But you know there's things that we have to make sure that are in place, and I think sometimes in teacher education we just don't prepare students with all the tricks and all the issues and all the things that they will face, and I think at Kindezi we try to be proactive with helping teachers deal with those issues.

*How would you describe your role as it relates to student learning at Kindezi?*

My role is two things. I think very early on, I did a lot of teacher training at Kindezi not just about hip hop in the classroom but really about culturally relevant pedagogy. And I trained the teachers and I would do a big workshop every year for new teachers just about This Is Kindezi, this is about love and joy and peace. What I also have done is teach my hip hop class at Kindezi for the last, oh my God, four or five years now. And so what has happened, is that the teachers see these kids in a different light, right. So the kids that I have that come in, you know, they're rapping, they're exploring new ideas, but we're also talking about really serious issues about social justice. Serious issues. You know my students did a movie about the death of Trayvon Martin. My students have done, they've gone

to protests, they've gone to marches, they've spoken at marches, they've done Afrofuturistic comic books. So we try to do, we try to use hip hop as a vehicle to have critical conversations about what's going on in the world. And as president of the board coming in and wanting to talk about black lives matter, you see the president of the board coming in and wanting to talk about culturally relevant pedagogy and why culturally relevant pedagogy's important, you see the president of the board coming in and teaching about social justice issues and bringing activists from the community and nationwide.

We had Philip Agnew from the Dream Defenders [Florida based civil rights group] come and talk to the kids, so I think when teachers see that from a leadership position, that gives them the green light to really push the button, to really hone in on those issues, to talk about justice to talk about inequalities. We had a teacher, I think two years ago, have a really great conversation with our seventh graders at that time about transgender folks. Also we had someone from Palestine come in and just talk about the issues and really what we try to do is present all issues and all sides to kids, as many as possible, and then the kids, you take a side, you take a stance, we're going to give you all the information, and that's what you know critical thinking is about. So we don't try to take a stance; what we try to say is, what do you think?

We present the sides to you, we have you argue the sides, we have you switch the debate and argue for the side you're not really on and do all those great things, and then once you pick a side tell us why you picked that side, and I think we know that doing that still hits standards. It's still critical thinking. All the things that we say we want to do in education, we can still do those things and prepare our kids for the world that they're going to be in. So I think at Kindezi we really try to give teachers the freedom to feel like they can tackle those kinds of issues and I think that's one of the things that



attracts teachers to the school. We get a lot of artists who are teachers, we get a lot of activists who are teachers at the school, I think because they are attracted to that model, especially the small classrooms. Also the support we give is important, so the freedom to have real conversations and create real curriculum for kids to start real conversations about what's going on in the world and not sugar coat this stuff.

*So if you could name one thing that makes Kindezi distinctive from all the other charters, what would that be?*

I think we're very concerned about not just our charter schools, we're very concerned about the community. So Kindezi is in Old Fourth Ward, right next to Hope Hill which is a public school. So it's Kindezi, which is the charter, and then there's Hope Hill which is the public school. We want to be in conversations with that public school. We know that charters sometimes take the best students. We know that sometimes charters have like the third arm of the school which are the parents. Alright, so we're very aware of that and so we understand that education is not just about our kids having good test scores, what about the community? What about Hope Hill?

And so we're constantly thinking about that. Our first school and our second school are completely different. You know they have a totally different feel. One is in the Old Fourth Ward, one is on the West Side. Old Fourth Ward, we sit about less than a mile away from Ponce City Market, which is Atlanta's own version of Chelsea City Market. We are now sitting in a highly gentrified area. So what is this going to mean for Old Fourth Ward Kindezi in 20 years, or five years, with it being in an area that's being highly gentrified? And this is King's district right? And so we're very concerned about that. You go on our website and you'll see that

our sixth pillar is promoting schools that have racial and economic diversity. And so you don't see that on any other charter school, but we are really focused on making sure that these schools are diverse, and we say that as one of our pillars, to make sure that schools are socially, economically, culturally, racially diverse and we understand that what a school thrives on is diversity. And so I would argue that if you have a school that has no diversity, that's not a good school, that's not the real world, it doesn't mimic schools. And so we're really focused on diversity and we don't just say it like in our mission statement, like we are actively trying to make sure our community reflects the real world and reflects this ever-changing Atlanta. We're very aware of what's happening in the city. And we're very aware when charter schools are successful that it pushes black and brown folks out. So we're aware of these things, and you know I think other charter schools, I'm not saying that they're not aware of it, but they're not constantly thinking about how this school is changing the demographic of that community and how this school, if it was focused on black and brown, low income kids, and how those black and brown low income kids are being pushed out of the neighborhood because the housing projects are skyrocketing because that school is so good. That's not a good thing. And we're not happy about that. We are actively making sure that we're recruiting those kids, we're recruiting the kids that these other charter schools are not, kids they think are difficult. We want them to come to our school. We want this school to be diverse. We want to have parents who work as doctors and lawyers. We want to have parents who might also work as janitors. We want all the kids together; that's what makes a great society and that's what makes a great school. And we truly believe that. And we work towards it, it's not just like lip service, we actually work towards it. We go recruit at the barber shops, we go recruit at the malls.

*In the midst of all the skepticism about charter schools, how do you introduce the school to the community?*

You know so we've tried to get community support. We tried to help the new community that we're coming into to see that we are aware you've been told a lot of things, you've been promised a lot of things and we are trying, we're in this for the long haul. So I think we are also coming in knowing we do good work but understanding the community that we're coming into and these people have been lied to and told all types of stuff, and now here comes another fix. We're very cautious of that. What we've done, is our principal for the new school, she's working this year. We paid her salary for one year, to really focus on the school, go out and do community engagement, start talking to people in that neighborhood. She doesn't even start until August but she has a full year to really think about what she wants that school to be and learn the community, learn who's there. So we really are trying to make those strides because we know what things are said about charter schools.

*In Georgia, voters will decide on opportunity school districts and given your position at Kindezi and social justice advocacy, how will you reconcile these for your ballot in the upcoming election?*

I'll just be upfront, I'm voting no on opportunity school districts. I don't think schools should be controlled by any governor. I think taking local control away from communities is always a disastrous thing. But in the same breath, there are some schools, when you look at some of these test scores, they're deplorable. I get frustrated on both sides of the argument. Right, we need to take over schools, I'm frustrated with that. Then I look at these test scores, I look at the trauma that's happening to these babies; I look at the data that says you know if you are a

child and you fail one to two grades you have a 60% chance that you will not graduate from high school. I look at the data that says you know at most affluent white schools, students learn at a growth percentile of 58%. If our schools are always, even some of our average schools, are always learning at 50%, between 47% and 50%, that's the achievement gap right there, always. Always. As someone who grew up from a working class family, my mother got her GED, my father went to eighth grade, I understand the importance of education, I get it; I know how important it is, and I had amazing teachers. That's the only reason, I am sitting in this chair is because of amazing teachers. And so for me, the way I can wrap my mind around this is that Kindezi, we are trying our best to put amazing teachers in front of our kids. And if we have to, which sometimes we do, we will turn, we will be a turnaround model, we will take funding from corporations, you know I'm not going to wave the flag and ride on my social justice horse and say we shouldn't take money from that corporation when I don't have it and I know our babies need it. So you know it is always just an internal fight about what we should do, what's next, and always trying to remember the end goal. And it's not just about education, we must change our communities. We have to make sure that these young folk, that we are pouring everything into them and they have jobs to get once they graduate.

We need to prepare our kids for the long game with schools like Kindezi, not charter schools; I'm not a charter school person even though I am the chair of a charter school. I do not, I'm not someone who will vote for charter schools. I didn't vote for the amendment in 2012, I'm not going to vote for opportunity school districts, I'm not someone who will go to a charter school convention; I'm not a big person for charter schools. What I am for is community schools. I am for individuals and their community having power over their schools and whatever model that can happen

through; I think that is important. But I think charter schools as an industry, the idea of opportunity schools districts is exactly right, it is an opportunity. It's an opportunity for big business, it's an opportunity for philanthropists, but I don't see it as an opportunity for the kids and the communities at all. And you know so what I would say, at Kindezi, you know we try to stay focused on what's right for the kids, what's right for the communities, and if it is taking over a school that we feel we can do a better job with, then that is what we will do. But we will, we never want to, you know, see ourselves as doing this work because we want to take over communities, we want to take over schools; we want you to know that's not our goal. Our goal is to do what's best for communities and schools, and if a Kindezi education will do that, then we will do our best to go into that school and do it.

[Interviewer Note: On November 8, 2016, 60.1% of Georgia voters voted no for an amendment allowing the state to create an Opportunity School District to oversee "failing" elementary and secondary schools.]

*Is there anything else that you would like to share about hip hop education, or education in general, or Kindezi as we conclude?*

I really want folks reading this to really know we should have conversations with teachers in our communities, with the families, with the kids, with the policy makers, with all of those people. Our kids are not at risk; they're at risk of all these things failing them. They're at risk of having a bad teacher and we should be honest about that. They're at risk of having communities that have not been loved on and cared for so long and then manipulated and become pockets of poverty because of policies, because of politicians, because of racism, because of red-lining. We do not talk a lot about how much kids have to overcome to be

a good learner or a good student or to be on grade level, all these things. And we don't talk about what the risks are that are out of their control. And I think that right there is what we don't have, more thorough conversations about in education. And we have those things in isolation. You have people who do policy work, you have people who do community work, school-based work, you have community people who do curriculum and instruction, but we don't put all those things together to really say, okay, this is how we look at just one community and really go after the one community for change. And I think that, you know for me, is what I get most frustrated with, is how we work in silos, but we all know how complex and intersectional these issues are and we don't draw on them in that way. We write papers, we write papers as if this is the solution. I've always just been just trying to figure out the bigger picture and trying to think more broadly and more collaboratively about ways in which young folk just want to express themselves and for me that's what hip hop comes from. You know hip hop education is not all they need. It's not going to save black kids, it's not going to save our inner cities, but what it is going to do is give them space to be themselves. It's a space of mattering. You know, we're saying black lives matter, but we've also got to figure out that we found spaces that matter. We've always found spaces to matter and so as communities we've got to go back to those spaces that we matter. We've mattered in our music, we've mattered in our creativity, we've mattered in our art, we've mattered in our public speaking, we've mattered in our churches. You know we matter in the ways in which we've always had ingenuity and found ways to just turn nothing into something over and over and over again. We know how to matter, and I think we have to go back to that and really flush out the ways in which people are always negotiating, always thinking, just the ingenuity that black and brown folks have, and put that at the heart of what we're trying to do.

And you know sometimes I think we lose, black and brown folks have always been at risk, but we've been at risk of state violence and we've been at risk of racism and white supremacy and patriarchy. You know that's our biggest risk. Our biggest risk is not ourselves. Our risks are structural things that refuse to change and continue to oppress us.

## CONCLUSION

This is an interview of Dr. Bettina Love and her work with the Kindezi Schools, a small high-performing charter group in Atlanta, Georgia. As the debate wages on for innovative schools and opportunity school districts versus traditional community schools, our kids are trapped in the balance. Dr. Love advocates as Dr. Asa Hilliard did in the opening quote, that we need to return to the foundational issues on why we educate and realize all we may need is Love.

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