



Embracing the Historical Legacy of Young, Gifted, and Black Educators

By Conra D. Gist

The Omission of a Historical Legacy

Today's young, gifted, and Black educators are the heirs of the historical legacy of struggle for the educational advancement of students, in particular Black students. Historically, countless battles have been fought by Black educators from the 19th century to the 21st century, representing one of the most industrious and persistent struggles for social justice with respect to education. The acknowledgement and use of such histories in curriculum and instruction is frequently absent within schools of education that prepare pre-service teachers of color. Therefore, today many graduating teachers of color begin the important work of teaching with scant knowledge of the historical legacy they inherit or the educational philosophy that Black educators embraced in the past. It is useful for young, gifted, and Black teacher candidates entering the profession to explore the legacy of Black educators of the past as they embark on their journey to become teachers. Examining this powerful historical legacy provides an opportunity for them to see themselves as part of a larger movement to make a difference in the academic achievement of all students.

A Historical Overview of Black Educators

The history of young, gifted, and Black educators within the field of education is well documented by many historians illustrating their invaluable contributions to American educational thought. These historians cite the long and often arduous journey of Black educational thought that evolved within slave quarter communities, in secret religious gatherings, throughout the Revolutionary War and Industrial Revolution, and during reactionary

periods within American history. Blacks who transitioned from slavery to quasi-serfdom forged a strong desire for education as a means to uplift their people: a desire that far surpassed the resources available to meet those needs.¹

Central to the story of Black desire for education is the role of young, gifted, and Black teachers. Many historians have cited the aid of Northern societies and White teachers through the Freedmen Schools as playing an influential role in the expansion of the Black social movement for education, even though they only reached a small percentage of the Black school-age population.² What remained were Black teachers who were forced to teach Black children with limited resources, facilities, and educational opportunities, which restricted their indoctrination into mainstream American society.³ Various curriculum practices emerged from these struggles during the late 1800s and early 1900s, and although Black educators came to conceptualize education in various ways, the common theme was education as a means of social uplift.

In his article, "We Can Best Instruct Our Own People: New York African Americans in the Freedmen's Schools, 1861-1875," Dr. Ronald Butchart of the University of Georgia describes the common experiences, motivations, beliefs, and aspirations of New York Black teachers going to work in Freedmen's Schools: "Limited educationally by their circumstances, they gave knowledge from their own store for incalculable rewards. Yet, what fear and loathing must have attended many of them as they traveled into that region, so recently the scare of Black slavery."⁴ In this time period, commonly described as the Reconstruction era in American history, Blacks experienced unprecedented power and prestige. One of the primary tools used by Blacks in their struggle for social mobility and advancement was education. During this particular time period, there were courageous New York Black teachers that sought to work toward the educational advancement of their people.

In fact, Butchart scanned several thousand biographies of Black teachers who had moved from the South and derived common motivational themes for teaching during the Reconstruction era: a powerful sense of calling (“a desire to be a pioneer in trying to raise up to the stature of manhood and womanhood in Christ Jesus”⁵); racial identification (“I believe we can best instruct our own people, knowing our own peculiarities-needs-necessities. Further-I believe, we, that are competent owe it to *our people* to teach them our *specialty*”⁶); and connection to their own roots in Southern soil (“earnest desire to return to my native home in Charleston wishing to labor for the intellectual advancement of my people”⁷). Later, during the classic age of segregation, Black educators’ motivations evolved and they began to play multifaceted roles as community leaders, moral exemplars, public health reformers, and civil rights activists. Unfortunately, when integration began to take hold via victories in the civil rights movement, it inadvertently resulted in significant job losses for Black teachers across the nation, and they began to explore other career paths.⁸ Recent studies have shown that the motivations of today’s Black educators in many ways coincide with the motivations of historical Black educators.⁹ For instance, one study found that Black women educators are motivated to teach due to intergenerational encouragement from other Black women, they view teaching as community work, and they see it as connected to a spiritual mission.¹⁰

Importance of Historical Legacy for Teacher Candidates

These motivational histories are important because they uphold the traditional values that young, gifted, and Black teachers sought then and still seek today: to address the needs of an oppressed group of people in spite of economic, institutional, and social obstacles. Providing instructional opportunities within schools of education that allow all teacher candidates to learn about this important historical legacy affords them an opportunity to identify, develop, and nurture a sense of pride in a mission launched long ago. Knowledge of the struggle for educational justice is critical, not just for Black students, but for students from all racial/ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and class backgrounds. Today’s educators, by embracing the historical legacy of Black education in America, are truly working for a purpose greater than themselves. It is a powerful testament to the importance of yesterday’s and today’s educational legacy, and an invigorating point of dialogue in educational arenas. The history of Black educators of the past represents a mission-based philosophy that today’s young, gifted, and Black teacher candidates, as well as all teacher candidates, can benefit from.

Notes

W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: an Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: S.A. Russell Company, 1935).

Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2007).

Ronald Butchart, “We Can Best Instruct Our Own People: New York African Americans in the Freedman’s Schools, 1861-1865,” *African Americans in New York Life* 12 (1988): 27-49.

Ibid., 28.

Ibid., 27-49.

Ibid.

Ibid.

V. P. Franklin, *The Education of Black Philadelphia: The Social and Educational History of Minority Community: 1900-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980).

Jeannine Dingus, “Community Reciprocity in the Work of African-American Teachers,” *Teaching Education* 17 (2006): 195-206.

Adrienne Dixon and Jeannine Dingus, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Black Women Teachers and Professionals Socialization,” *Teachers College Record* 110 (2008): 805-837.



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Lesson Plan

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Connections to Teacher Preparation

The historical legacy of young, gifted, and black educators can be incorporated in the content of instruction for a variety of courses offered in most teacher education programs, such as Literacy Methods, Social Studies Methods, Multicultural Perspectives, and History of American Education. The lesson that follows is an activity that highlights a spotlight text, incorporates group work, and allows teacher candidates to engage in reflective practices.

Goals of the Lesson Plan

The larger goals for teacher candidates in this lesson are as follows: (1) Gain knowledge about the history of Black educational thought; (2) Learn about an educational pioneer that fought for the educational advancement of students of color; and (3) Reflect on the impact of this knowledge on their instructional practices as future teachers.

Objectives

Teacher candidates will describe, discuss, and defend the history of Black educational thought by critically reading an assigned text, participating in group and class discussions, and engaging in reflective practices.

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards

- Assist learners in acquiring knowledge of the historical content in United States history in order to ask large and searching questions that compare patterns of continuity and change in the history and values of the many peoples who have contributed to the development of the continent of North America;
- Help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings;
- Guide learners as they construct reasoned judgments about specific cultural responses to persistent human issues.

Activity Session

1. Preparation

At the end of the preceding class, have students log in their reflection journals a response to the following question: “What is the history of Black educational thought?” Then, assign pages 11-51 for students to read from the spotlight text described below, which is the section titled “Freedom for Literacy and Literacy for Freedom: The African-American Philosophy of Education.”

Spotlight Text: *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Academic Achievement among African-American Students* by Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hillard III, Boston: Beacon, 2003.

In *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Academic Achievement among African-American Students*, Perry describes an African American philosophy of learning that historically viewed literacy as the practice of freedom and served to motivate generations of Blacks to pursue education through the passing down of oral and written histories. She argues that this oral and written tradition of literacy as the practice of freedom served as an important component of black intellectual identity development. In the preceding chapters, Perry uses this African American educational philosophy of learning to refute post-civil rights deficit views that African American students don’t want to learn and outlines critical theoretical and practical implications for the practices of teachers, schools, and communities.

2. Whole Class Discussion

Open the class by providing an overview of the Black aspirations and commitment to education (use Spotlight Text and Teacher References as needed). Explain that the biographical narratives incorporated in the first section of the spotlight text illustrate important components of Black educational thought. Have the class focus on the biographical narrative of Septima Clark, an influential African American educator during the civil rights movement. Guide the class through a discussion of the Septima Clark narrative using the following conceptual categories: *Views of Schools, Education, and Learning* (What were her experiences teaching in schools? What value did she place on education and why?); *Views of Community* (How did family and community influence her aspirations?); *Strategies/Tools for Overcoming Obstacles/Injustice* (What obstacles/injustices did she face? What tools did she use to overcome obstacles?); and *Significant Achievements/Accomplishments*

(What significant achievements did she attain? What actions, strategies, and/or tools did she use en route to her achievements?)

3. Group/Partnership Work

After modeling the use of a categorical framework to understand Black educational thought through the narrative of Septima Clark, organize students in groups and allow groups to choose one short biography to unpack from the Spotlight Text. Using the same categorical framework modeled in the discussion of Septima Clark, have students work in groups to develop descriptions for each of the categories on chart paper for presentation to the class. Assign roles to group members such as transcriber, presenter, facilitator, and researcher. After allowing 15-20 minutes for group/partner discussion, have each group share their responses. As students are sharing responses, facilitate the discussion to note commonalities and differences apparent in Black educational thought across the narratives. Also, have students consider how these narratives can be used to inform their practices as teachers in the first part of the 21st century.

4. Reflective Practices

Explain that Perry recognizes the value and legacy of “young, gifted, and Black” students in America and is offering an important instructional tool for engaging students through narratives about their historical legacy. Discuss with students the value of using written histories as content for the instructional practices they employ to students across the disciplines. As a class, brainstorm various ways narratives such as these can be used when working with students. Have students reread the reflective logs they wrote in the preceding class that responded to the prompt “What is the history of Black educational thought?” and now respond to the following prompt: “What did you find most surprising about the history of Black educational thought? How does this history impact your thinking about teaching Black students?”

5. Assessment

Informal writing assignment (out of class): Imagine you are asked to write a philosophy of teaching statement for a middle school teaching position. The job announcement specifically states that teachers applying for this job must have knowledge of the history of Black educational thought to educate students at the predominately Black school. Write a philosophy of teaching statement that demonstrates your knowledge of Black educational thought and explains how it will inform your collegial and instructional practices at this school.

Teacher Resources

1. *Honoring the Legacy of Inclusion: NEA and the American Teachers Association*. This website provides resources pertaining to the history of Black educators. <https://sites.nea.org/aboutnea/atheater.html>
2. Issue Title “New Perspectives on African American Educational History,” *The Journal of African American History* 87 (Autumn 2002). This issue investigates the history of African American education from 1861–1974 and researches such topics as African American education during the Reconstruction era, Howard University, the United Negro College Fund, and the origins of Women’s Studies programs.
3. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (The ASALH Press, 2005).
4. Joi A. Spencer, Ph.D., Clementine Carr, Carolyn Mattocks, and Vivian Fairnot, *Study Guide to the Mis-Education of the Negro by Carter G. Woodson*, online at http://www.asalh.org/files/Miseducation_Study_Guide.pdf.
5. Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1919).
6. Cornell University Lecture and Panel Discussion, “A Brief History of Black Education: Ithaca and Beyond,” featuring Ira Revels, Dr. Margaret Washington, and Dr. Sean Eversley-Bradwell. Podcast from February 25, 2009, online at <http://www.cornell.edu/video/?VideoID=510>.
7. James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
8. David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1974).
9. Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).
10. Patricia Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
11. Michelle Foster, *Black Teachers on Teaching* (New York: New York, 1997).
12. Michael Homel, *Down from Equality: Black Chicagoans and the Public Schools, 1920-1941* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).
13. Thomas Webber, *Deep like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarters 1831-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).
14. James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
15. Vanessa Siddle Walker, “Organized Resistance and Black Educators’ Quest for School Equality: 1878-1938,” *Teachers College Record* 107 (2005): 355-388.
16. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “Womanist Lessons for Reinventing Teaching,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 56 (2005): 436-445.